



STRATEGY FOR THE LONG HAUL

CSBA

Regaining Strategic Competence

BY ANDREW F. KREPINEVICH
AND BARRY D. WATTS

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 20 MAR 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Regaining Strategic Competence			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, DC			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 68	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy and resource allocation.

CSBA provides timely, impartial and insightful analyses to senior decision makers in the executive and legislative branches, as well as to the media and the broader national security community. CSBA encourages thoughtful participation in the development of national security strategy and policy, and in the allocation of scarce human and capital resources. CSBA's analysis and outreach focus on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to US national security. Meeting these challenges will require transforming the national security establishment, and we are devoted to helping achieve this end.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Andrew Marshall for renewing our interest in this area. We would also like to thank the CSBA staff for their assistance with this report; special thanks go to Charlotte Brock and Eric Lindsey for their editorial and production support and to Cutting Edge for their design.

The analysis and findings presented here are solely the responsibility of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and the authors.

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By Andrew F. Krepinevich and
Barry D. Watts

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This report is one in a series comprising CSBA's Strategy for the Long Haul intended to inform and shape the next administration's defense strategy review.

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My fellow Americans,

America is at war. This is a wartime national security strategy required by the

... the rise of terrorism fueled by an aggressive ideology of hatred and n

... the American people on September 11, 2001. This strategy reflects

... the security of the American people.

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



- Some of our oldest and closest friends disagree on the nature of the global terrorist threat.
- We have disagreed on the steps to take in the WTO Doha Round of negotiations, despite our shared concern with global environmental security.

C. The Way Ahead

The struggle against terrorism is a long-term effort. The early years of the 21st century will be a period of intense competition.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ability of the US national security establishment to craft, implement, and adapt effective long-term strategies against intelligent adversaries at acceptable costs has been declining for some decades. Granted, US strategic performance since the late 1960s has not been uniformly poor, as the outcome of the Cold War testifies. US strategies such as offsetting Warsaw Pact numerical superiority with precision strike, increased US defense spending in the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, and the covert arming of mujahedeen fighters to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan all contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, even if the more fundamental causes were economic decline and the loss of confidence in the Soviet system. And, while long overdue, the improvement in US strategy in Iraq since 2006 has also been impressive. Nevertheless, the overall trend in the strategic performance of American political and military elites appears to be one of decline.

Reversing this decline in US strategic competence is an urgent issue for American national security in the twenty-first century. The reason lies in the multi-faceted security challenges that the United States now faces. The three challenges most likely to persist and possibly grow more acute in coming years are: defeating both the Sunni Salafi-Takfiri and Shia Khomeinist brands of Islamist radicalism; hedging against the rise of a more confrontational or hostile China; and preparing for a world in which there are progressively more nuclear-armed regional powers than there were in the early 1990s. These challenges present the United States with a more complex and diverse array of security concerns than did the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Islamist radicalism and nuclear proliferation present challenges far different from the large-scale, high-intensity, non-nuclear (or "conventional") warfare at which the US military excels. At the same time, the Chinese military appears to be systematically targeting weaknesses in the current American way of war, especially US power projection in the western Pacific and dependence on space systems.

Why has US strategic performance been deteriorating? The deeper problem seems to be more a lack of understanding of what strategy is than structural or organizational

defects in the United States' national security establishment. Both public strategy documents from recent administrations and actual American strategic behavior suggest that US political and military leaders have been increasingly inclined to equate strategy with listing desirable goals, as opposed to figuring out how to achieve them. As a practical matter, strategy is about making insightful choices of courses of action likely to achieve one's ultimate goals despite resource constraints, political considerations, bureaucratic resistance, the adversary's opposing efforts, and the intractable uncertainties as to how a chosen strategy may ultimately work out. Competent strategy focuses on how one's ends may be achieved. In this vein, strategy is fundamentally about identifying or creating asymmetric advantages that can be exploited to help achieve one's ultimate objectives despite resource and other constraints—most critically the opposing efforts of one's adversaries and the inherent unpredictability of strategic outcomes.

How important is it to strive to do strategy well rather than poorly? Why is a concerted effort to do strategy well preferable to merely muddling through in response to unfolding crises and events? If the threat to use military force, or its actual use, is to be justifiable, then strategy appears to be necessary. Without strategy the use of force is merely random violence.

This being the case, is effective strategy feasible? Might strategic competence be merely an illusion given the unpredictability of strategic outcomes? The various objections of academic strategists to the possibility of strategy are grounded in a Western standard of rationality that demands the explicit maximization of benefits relative to costs. In other words, unless strategies and their implementations are optimal in the sense of utility maximization across costs, benefits and risks, then strategy is an illusion. But while one might wish that strategies could meet this standard of rationality, in reality it is an impossibly high desideratum. As the Nobel laureate Herbert Simon noted in the 1950s, humans lack the complete information and computational capacity required to make optimal choices. That is why strategic choices are, as strategist Richard Rumelt has observed, ultimately heuristics or guesses subject to the indeterminacy and contingency of ultimate outcomes. As for the option of merely muddling through in response to events, that too is a strategic choice. But it is unlikely to be the wisest one.

If strategy is both necessary and possible, are there historical cases in which strategic choices by the side that ultimately prevailed appear to have played a significant role in the outcome? One of the most extensively researched and documented instances is that of Anglo-American versus Nazi Germany strategic performance during World War II. British and American grand strategy was largely crafted by four men: President Franklin Roosevelt, General George Marshall, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Field Marshall Alan Brooke. German grand strategy, on the other hand, was mostly dictated by one man, Adolph Hitler. The contrast in strategic performance between the two sides is striking. Whereas the Allies avoided major strategic missteps, Hitler was guilty of numerous blunders, some of which were repetitions of the same mistake.

The first major choice that the British and Americans agreed upon in January 1942 was a “Germany first” strategy. This decision was based on the insight that defeating Germany first would make Japan’s surrender a matter of time, whereas defeating Japan first would not materially weaken Germany, especially if the Germans succeeded in conquering Russia. The next strategic decision the four Allied leaders faced was how to defeat Nazi Germany. George Marshall argued from the beginning that Germany’s defeat would require a cross-Channel invasion of northern France followed by a direct advance into Germany to confront the German army head on and, by capturing the Ruhr and Saar, deny Nazi forces the ability to fight on indefinitely. Churchill and Brooke, however, ever mindful of the limits the First World War had imposed on Commonwealth resources and of the superior fighting power of the Germans, were inclined to pursue peripheral objectives in the Mediterranean. The campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy eventually deferred the Allied landings in Normandy until June 1944. In hindsight, these peripheral campaigns were not major strategic mistakes. By mid-1944, the Allies’ campaigns in the Mediterranean had given US forces, commanders, and staffs needed battle experience and had also tied down substantial German forces in Italy. In addition, the Combined Bomber Offensive had placed increasing stress on Germany’s war economy; the Allies had achieved air superiority over Western Europe; and the German disasters at Stalingrad and Kursk had kept Russia in the war while further weakening the Wehrmacht and limiting Hitler’s capacity to move forces from the Eastern Front to Western Europe. Churchill and Brooke were undoubtedly right to oppose a cross-Channel invasion in 1942 and even in 1943, but Roosevelt and Marshall were right to insist on one in 1944.

Hitler’s major decisions, by contrast, were rife with strategic blunders. He began World War II without fully mobilizing the German economy. He attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 without fully appreciating the resources that defeating Russia might ultimately require. He pursued counterproductive objectives as exemplified by his racial policies in Russia and his obsession with Stalingrad as a prestige objective. Time and again, Hitler’s “no retreat” decisions wasted resources Germany could not afford to waste. His contempt for the productivity of the US economy and the fighting power the Allies would eventually bring to bear against Germany reflected a lack of understanding of his adversaries. Thus, German grand strategy during World War II was prone to repeated blunders whereas Anglo-American grand strategy was not.

What conclusion about the importance of strategic competence can be drawn from this case study? The temptation to attribute Allied victory exclusively, or even mostly, to superior Anglo-American strategic performance must be resisted; the causes of Allied victory were many. Allied air power, for example, did not win World War II for the Allies by itself, but it was a critical weakness on the Axis side and perhaps the greatest single advantage enjoyed by the Allies. The Allies gave greater priority to air power, particularly to heavy bombers, than did the Germans and, as World War II unfolded, the Allies took full advantage of their strength in the air. By contrast, the Luftwaffe’s failure to gain air superiority over the Royal Air Force in 1940 precluded a German cross-Channel invasion of England and turned Hitler’s thoughts toward

invading Russia instead. Thus, one cannot attribute Allied victory to any single cause, including superior strategy. Nevertheless, Germany's strategic blunders together with the absence of major mistakes on the Allied side were surely contributing factors in the ultimate outcome.

If strategy is necessary, possible, and important, it is nonetheless difficult. Evidence of ill-conceived, inadequately thought-through, poor, or counterproductive strategies abounds. Building on the list of "common strategy sins" Richard Rumelt has culled from his long experience with business strategy, one can identify at least ten recurring pitfalls that can undermine competent strategic performance.

1. Failure to recognize or take seriously the scarcity of resources.
2. Mistaking strategic goals for strategy.
3. Failure to recognize or state the strategic problem.
4. Choosing poor or unattainable strategic goals.
5. Not defining the strategic challenge competitively.
6. Making false presumptions about one's own competence or the likely causal linkages between one's strategy and one's goals.
7. Insufficient focus on strategy due to such things as trying to satisfy too many different stakeholders or bureaucratic processes.
8. Inaccurately determining one's areas of comparative advantage relative to the opposition.
9. Failure to realize that few individuals possess the cognitive skills and mindset to be competent strategists.
10. Failure to understand the adversary.

In World War II Hitler fell prey to most of these pitfalls, whereas the British and American leaders mostly avoided them due to the collegiate process by which Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Brooke argued out their strategic choices. Hitler could, and did, override his generals, whereas none of the four Allied grand strategists could override the other three, and the occasions when they split two-against-two usually resulted in compromises that also avoided outright blunders.

The persistent recurrence of these strategy pitfalls argues that deciding in whose hands to place US strategy in the twenty-first century is a critical issue. The fact is, however, that few individuals—regardless of intelligence, education, credentials or experience—possess the necessary cognitive skills and insight to be competent strategists. The insight to see more deeply than one's opponents into the possibilities and probabilities of a competitive situation is rare. Strategy may be a game anyone can play, but the evidence is strong that very few can play it well. Thus, identifying

individuals with the mindset and talents to craft strategy competently is one step the United States will need to take to regain strategic competence.

What other steps might the US security establishment consider taking to begin regaining a modicum of strategic competence, especially at the national level? First, a reversal of the adverse trend in US strategic performance is unlikely unless the president takes strategy seriously enough to invest time and energy into the crafting and implementation of American strategy. Two presidents who did take strategy seriously were Abraham Lincoln and Dwight Eisenhower, and their examples remain worthy of study and emulation. Second, while process and organizational remedies do not go to the heart of the matter, there is merit in recreating entities similar to the Eisenhower administration's Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board. The former helped Eisenhower and his key advisors develop effective strategies and the latter ensured that the government implemented them.

The central argument of this report is that, in light of the complex and intensifying security challenges the United States now faces, the nation can no longer afford poor strategic performance. The time to reverse the decline in US strategic competence is long overdue. The first task is for American political and military leaders to develop a clearer understanding of what strategy actually is, and what cognitive skills are necessary to craft and implement good strategies.



INTRODUCTION

STRATEGY VERSUS STRUCTURE

Resources are always limited in comparison with our wants, always constraining out action. (If they did not, we could do everything, and there would be no problem of choosing preferred courses of action.)

— Charles Hitch and Roland McKean, 1960¹

The defining principle of the Pentagon's new National Defense Strategy is balance. The United States cannot expect to eliminate national security risks through higher defense budgets, to do everything and buy everything. The Department of Defense must set priorities and consider inescapable tradeoffs and opportunity costs.

— Robert Gates, 2009²

In 2007 the Center for Strategic and Budget Assessments (CSBA) began a multi-year effort to develop a US defense posture and strategy for the long haul. This effort included a comprehensive review of the United States' defense budgets, Service and joint programs, defense industrial base, manpower requirements, military forces, operational concepts, planning scenarios, national-security structure, and strategy. The project had two principal aims. The first was to generate the sort of independent analysis and insight that might help the next administration craft a more balanced approach to meeting the complex needs of US national security in first half of the twenty-first century. The second was to jump-start the next Quadrennial Defense Review, which the Department of Defense now plans to complete during 2009.

CSBA's long-haul effort was predicated on the view that the United States now faces three long-term security challenges that, in many respects, are more complex and divergent than those posed by Soviet power and ideology during the Cold War.

¹ Charles J. Hitch and Roland N. McKean. *The Economics of Defense in the Nuclear Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 23.

² Robert M. Gates, "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for the New Age," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009.

During the long competition with the Soviet Union, the principal challenge the United States faced was containing Soviet expansionist tendencies until the Bolshevik regime (which George F. Kennan correctly diagnosed after World War II as bearing within it the seeds of its own decay) collapsed from within.³ Today, the principal security challenges confronting the United States are: defeating both the Sunni Salafi-Takfiri and Shia Khomeinist brands of Islamist radicalism; hedging against the rise of a more openly confrontational or hostile China; and preparing for a world in which there are progressively more nuclear-armed regional powers.

There is every reason to expect that these three challenges will persist for decades and may grow more acute. Al Qaeda's September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon now appear to have been the opening blow in what could become a worldwide insurgency waged by terrorists and extremists with the aim of undermining the power and dominance of Western states, particularly that of the United States. The prospect of an atomic arc of instability, stretching from Iran along the shores of the Persian Gulf, through Pakistan, India and China, to North Korea at the Sea of Japan, with the likelihood of another round of proliferation in the Middle East, confronts the United States with a substantially different challenge from that posed by Soviet nuclear arms during the Cold War. The possibility that a terrorist organization may one day acquire a nuclear weapon illustrates the potential interconnections between the principal security challenges currently confronting the United States. Meanwhile, China is engaged in an openly declared, long-term effort to expand its defense perimeter in ways that could threaten vital US security interests in Asia and the Pacific.

America's brief "unipolar moment" following the Soviet Union's collapse may have seduced some into thinking that the country's vital interests could be sustained with only a minor expenditure of resources. This is clearly no longer the case. While there are grounds for thinking that the United States may eventually achieve its strategic aims in Iraq, the cost in blood and treasure has been far higher than anticipated in early 2003. The United States has also become the world's principal debtor nation, and is now suffering from a financial crisis that, by many accounts, will produce the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression. The country can no longer afford—if it ever could—a "rich man's" strategy of solving national security problems by throwing money at them. Instead, the United States needs to devise "smarter" strategies—strategies that husband resources, engage allies, and impose disproportionate costs on adversaries by focusing our strengths against their weaknesses. US national defense strategies, as well as the forces and capabilities they call for, must be both affordable and sustainable over the long term.

In 2007, when CSBA began its Long Haul project, the plan was to publish the results in a series of some fifteen monographs. The first three appeared in August 2008.

³ See "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, which Kennan published anonymously under the pseudonym X. In his February 1946 "long telegram" from the US embassy in Moscow, Kennan likened world communism to a "malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue."

This particular monograph, tentatively titled “Organizing for Defense,” was originally conceived as focusing on recommended changes to the organization and structure of the US national security establishment. Issues envisioned for this report included the organization and functioning of the National Security Council and the structural linkages between the various intelligence agencies and the Defense Department.

However, as CSBA’s research and analysis proceeded, it became increasingly clear that the organization and structure of the US national-security establishment, while far from ideal, were not the most fundamental problems. The far more important and critical issue was the US government’s ability to craft, implement, and evolve long-term strategies. As Aaron Friedberg concluded following his service on the National Security Council (NSC) from 2003 to 2005, the US government “has lost the capacity to conduct serious, sustained national strategic planning.”⁴ More precisely, since the early 1970s, and possibly earlier, the US national security establishment has enjoyed progressively less success in crafting and implementing long-term national and military strategies that offered reasonable prospects of achieving American political and strategic goals within realistic resource constraints against intelligent, adaptive, determined adversaries. Hence, this monograph focuses on the problem of regaining US strategic competence rather than on organizational charts and wiring diagram issues. Focusing on organizational arrangements and structures risks placing the process “cart” before the strategy “horse.”

This view of the fundamental malaise affecting American strategy should not, of course, be taken to imply that organizational changes to the present national security structure are irrelevant. Some structural remedies, including resurrection of entities along the lines of the NSC Planning and Operations Coordinating Boards that proved so successful during the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower, will be advanced. Nonetheless, revising organizational charts does not constitute the heart of the strategy challenge now facing the United States. Consider, for example, the extent to which a consistent feature of US strategy in the Middle East following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 has been the acceptance of huge costs for the United States compared with those imposed on our enemies. Being on the wrong side of cost imposition is not a characteristic of strategic competence. Without a concerted effort to regain strategic competence, it therefore appears doubtful that the US government will be likely to craft national strategies that can be both sustained and afforded over the long haul.

In light of this perspective, this monograph proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 explores the deteriorating of US strategic competence. Chapter 2 tackles the question of what strategy is. Chapter 3 addresses the charge that strategy is an illusion and offers historical evidence that strategic competence matters. Chapter 4 discusses common strategy pitfalls. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations on how the United States can begin to regain strategic competence.

⁴ Aaron L. Friedberg, “Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2007–08, p. 47.



CHAPTER 1 > HAS US STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE BEEN DETERIORATING?

I agree that as a national security establishment we do not “do strategy” well, as defined by academic strategists. But I don’t think the United States or other modern great powers have ever done strategy well, as defined by academic strategists, so the deficiency may not be so consequential. . . . I think the real problem is the political context, especially the partisan political context. . . . But some of the same reasons that we do not do strategy well are also the same reasons that we are, as a nation, less vulnerable to bad strategy than, say, Germany was [in World War II]. Our fractious democratic politics make strategy hard to do, but it also makes us strong relative to our adversaries.

—Peter Feaver, 2008⁵

Americans have proved vulnerable to the temptation to leap from policy selection to military operations, largely neglecting the essential levels of grand strategy and military strategy.

—Colin Gray, 2009⁶

What led to the conclusion that the overall ability of the US national security establishment to craft, implement, and evolve long-term strategies offering some prospect of success at acceptable costs had been declining for several decades? After all, the Cold War grand strategy of containment is generally considered to have been successful. It was the Soviet Union, not the United States, that collapsed in 1991, abruptly and largely unexpectedly ending the Cold War. Indeed, US strategy since World War II has had its failures, notably in Vietnam. But it has also had its successes; why then conclude that the overall trend has been negative?

⁵ Peter D. Feaver, email to Barry Watts, December 30, 2008. Feaver took a leave of absence from Duke University to serve on the NSC. He rejoined Duke’s political science department after leaving the NSC. The majority of this quote is from an earlier email, but Feaver modified the original version to provide some missing context.

⁶ Colin S. Gray, “After Iraq: The Search for a Sustainable National Security Strategy,” US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, January 2009, pp. xi–xii.

One of the reasons was a growing sense, by 2005, that American strategy in Iraq was not working. Worse, the principal reason seemed to be that the United States and its coalition partners had “never settled on a strategy for defeating the insurgency and achieving their broader objectives.”⁷

On the political front, they have been working to create a democratic Iraq but that is a goal, not a strategy. On the military front they have sought to train Iraqi security forces and turn the war over to them. As President George W. Bush has stated, “Our strategy can be summed up this way: as the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.” But the president is describing a withdrawal plan rather than a strategy.⁸

The sense that the Bush administration was having difficulty with effective strategy formulation was only partly supported by Peter Feaver’s experience trying to develop long-term strategy at the NSC. From June 2005 to July 2007 Feaver served as the Special Advisor for Strategic Planning and Institutional Reform on the NSC staff at the White House, a new cell established by Steve Hadley precisely to do the kinds of crossing-cutting national strategy planning that critics had said the administration was not doing well enough. Strategic planning at the White House proved to be difficult but not, in his view, impossible. On the positive side, his office was able to play a key role in developing the new Iraq “Surge” strategy and his office participated in a number of “Team B” internal critiques that contributed to longer-term shifts in strategy. On the other hand, Feaver was not able to do what many strategists were calling for: a Solarium-type exercise devoted to revising grand strategy for the overall war on terror. While the Iraq strategy review did resemble in part the Solarium exercise—including sustained high-level involvement and sharply diverging options defended by powerful insiders—it was more narrowly focused on Iraq. Feaver found that it was not feasible to do a broader-gauged study focused on overall grand strategy.

Outside critics say that the Bush administration’s second term record—relatively effective strategic planning on some key issues like Iraq but less effective strategic planning on others—underscores their concerns about the US government’s capacity to formulate comprehensive, long-term national security and defense strategies. In 2006, Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, agreeing with David Abshire, offered this assessment:

There is still no systematic effort at strategic planning for national security that is inclusive, deliberative, and integrative. David Abshire was correct in concluding that the demands of strategic transformation necessitate “structural reforms aimed at constructing

⁷ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., “How to Win in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2005, p. 87.

⁸ Ibid. President Bush’s summary of US strategy in Iraq is from a speech he gave at Fort Bragg, NC, on June 28, 2005. In it he stated that the principal task of the military was “to find and defeat terrorists” (see <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/06/20050628-7.html>>). Krepinevich’s argument in “How To Win in Iraq” was that the United States and the Iraqis should abandon the focus on killing insurgents and, instead, concentrate on “providing security and opportunity to the Iraqi people, thereby denying insurgents the popular support they need” (ibid., pp. 88–89).

a 'rooftop' that integrates the several key strategic pillars (diplomatic, economic, military, etc.) of American power and influence." The reality is that America's most fundamental deliberations are made in an environment that remains dominated by the needs of the present and the cacophony of current crises.⁹

Even if Flournoy and Brimley were inclined to lean too heavily on structural and process remedies to address the problems of declining US strategic competence, they were certainly right to argue that the urgency of current crises seemed to be increasingly crowding out the US government's capacity to think about longer-term and possibly more important strategic issues.

Flournoy and Brimley were also right to highlight the Project Solarium exercise at the beginning of the Eisenhower administration as an "example of a truly inclusive and integrated process of long-term strategic planning" worthy of emulation today.¹⁰ Eisenhower himself personally instigated and structured the exercise in May 1953. From there, Solarium evolved into a five-week effort in which separate teams of "bright young fellows" explored three alternative strategies: the existing US containment strategy (Team A), a stronger version of containment aimed at drawing a line beyond which further expansion of Soviet power would not be tolerated (Team B), and the rollback of Soviet influence (Team C).¹¹ It is important to recall, however, that while Eisenhower himself ruled out the strategy of coercive rollback when the teams briefed their strategies on July 16 in the White House solarium, it took the NSC another three months to resolve the deeper disagreements. Eisenhower's new national security strategy, NSC 162/2 ("Basic National Security Policy"), which relied on a massive atomic retaliatory capability to minimize the risk of Soviet aggression and general nuclear war, was not finalized until October 30, 1953.¹² Moreover, not all the strategy issues raised by Solarium were settled with the adoption of NSC 162/2. Some were resolved in other documents, and some were not finally settled until a year or more of further debate had occurred.¹³ Nonetheless, Solarium provides an exemplar of truly inclusive and integrated strategic planning by the US government.

Solarium provides
an exemplar of
truly inclusive and
integrated strategic
planning by the US
government.

⁹ Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley, "Strategic Planning for National Security," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 2nd Quarter 2006, pp. 80–81. This article was drawn from a longer paper Flournoy and Brimley did for the Princeton Project on National Security (available at <<http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/papers.html>>). The source of the quotation Flournoy and Brimley use in this passage is David M. Abshire, "Comprehensive Strategic Reform: Panel Report for the President and Congress," Center for the Study of the Presidency, September 2001, p. 4. Abshire was the US ambassador to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) from 1983 to 1987.

¹⁰ Flournoy and Brimley, "Strategic Planning for National Security," p. 82.

¹¹ Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 125. A fourth strategy, preventative war, was contemplated but dropped (*ibid.*, p. 126).

¹² NSC 162/2, "Basic National Security Policy," October 30, 1953, p. 19; available at <<http://www.jan.vandercrabben.name/nsc/index.php>>.

¹³ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 7.

What other considerations suggest that overall American performance has not only been declining, but has been doing so for decades? Again, there is the American defeat in Vietnam, an outcome that most observers link to the Tet Offensive that began in late January 1968. Although the offensive cost the Communists around 45,000 men (of the 84,000 who initiated the attacks) and destroyed the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, television coverage in the United States “shattered public morale and destroyed the support for the war.”¹⁴ Moreover, the essence of the US strategic failure in Vietnam appears to lie in the fact that the US Army in particular “placed a disproportionate emphasis on combating the external threat” from North Vietnam while failing to give priority to “the internal threat to the stability and legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government.”¹⁵ Not only did this strategic error lead to defeat, but it appears to have been repeated in Iraq. For this reason it is difficult to argue that the decline in US strategic competence is a recent phenomenon.

As for the post-9/11 US campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, while their ultimate outcomes are still uncertain, they have already incurred considerable human, budgetary, and material costs. To date, some 4,800 US Service members have been killed in these wars, and about 33,000 have been wounded.¹⁶ CSBA's latest estimate of the direct budgetary costs of these wars through 2018, including associated homeland security efforts and related operations, is that the bill will come to \$1.3–1.7 trillion in 2008 dollars.¹⁷ The human costs borne by the Iraqis and Afghans have been even higher. By mid-2007, the United Nations estimated that 2.4 million Iraqis had fled the country and another 2 million had been displaced from their homes but remained inside Iraq; worse yet, at the height of the insurgency in Iraq, in late 2006, 2,500 to 3,000 Iraqi civilians were being killed monthly by suicide bombers and sectarian violence.¹⁸

These various costs were far greater than anticipated at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in March 2003. Prior to the war, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) director Mitch Daniels told the *New York Times* that the direct budgetary costs could be \$50–60 billion, roughly the cost of the 1991 Persian Gulf War.¹⁹ While this estimate was little more than a guess, administration officials unquestionably vastly underestimated the fiscal costs of overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime and rebuilding the country. For example, in February 2003, deputy defense

¹⁴ Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1956–1975* (New York and Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1988), pp. 475, 485. A retired Army lieutenant general, Davidson was, for two years, the chief intelligence officer to Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams.

¹⁵ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 268.

¹⁶ Steven M. Kosiak, “Cost of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Other Military Operations Through 2008 and Beyond,” CSBA, 2008, p. i.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

¹⁸ General David H. Petraeus, “Multi-National Force-Iraq,” slides accompanying his Congressional testimony, September 10–11, 2007, Slide 3.

¹⁹ Dana Bash, “What Would War with Iraq Cost?” CNN.com, posted January 2, 2003.

secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz rightly emphasized to a Congressional budget committee that any estimates of the costs of regime change and Iraqi reconstruction were highly speculative. Yet he also told the committee that press reports of costs in the vicinity of \$60–95 billion were not credible, and suggested that Iraq's oil revenues of \$15–20 billion a year could cover reconstruction.²⁰

In fairness, there are reasons the costs of OIF in particular were underestimated. There is evidence that defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld's intention was to overthrow Saddam Hussein and then get quickly out of Iraq.²¹ Unfortunately, the campaign did not unfold exactly as planned and the United States soon became bogged down in reconstructing Iraq.

Grossly underestimating the fiscal cost of OIF was not the only strategic misstep US leaders committed in Iraq. In January 2007, retired General John F. Keane, who had been Army vice chief of staff when the campaign kicked off in March 2003, as well as one of the architects of the "surge" later implemented by General David H. Petraeus, offered this assessment of US strategy:

- > First, from an early point in the planning for OIF, the Pentagon opted for a minimal-force-level, short-war approach to regime change in Iraq.
- > Second, US decision-makers did not anticipate an insurgency on the part of disenfranchised Sunnis, much less one that would be increasingly aided and abetted by al Qaeda terrorists and other jihadists, criminal elements, Iraqi militias (both Shia and Sunni), and the Iranians.
- > Third, once the insurgency began to gather momentum, the US military persisted with its short-war approach based on two premises: first, that American forces could take the lead in defeating the insurgency and do so quickly enough to avoid a protracted American involvement in Iraq that would undermine US domestic support for the war; and, second, that predominantly military means would suffice to achieve the political objective of a stable, representative Iraqi government quickly and directly.
- > Fourth, even after it became apparent that the military strategy focused on capturing and killing insurgents and terrorists was failing, US political and military leaders failed to undertake appropriate adjustments in light of the fractious and uncompromising post-Ba'athist political culture in Iraq.²²

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²⁰ Wolfowitz in "Department of Defense Budget Priorities for Fiscal Year 2004," Hearing before the Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives, Serial No. 108-6, February 27, 2003, pp. 17–18.

²¹ John Barry and Michael Hirsh, "A Warrior Lays Down His Arms," *Newsweek*, November 20, 2006; online at <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/44602>>.

²² "Senator Clinton Questions Defense Secretary William Perry, Ambassador Dennis Ross, and General Jack Keane on Iraq Strategy," US Senate Armed Services Committee, January 25, 2007, online at <<http://www.senate.gov/~clinton/news/statements/record.cfm?id=268038>>.

The United States embarked on regime change in Iraq without adequately preparing for the protracted rebuilding phase that followed major combat operations; it took nearly four years to develop what appears to be a winning strategy.

Until General Petraeus assumed command in Iraq in February 2007, most US commanders persisted in pursuing a “capture and kill” approach that bore a striking resemblance to the unsuccessful “search and destroy” strategy that General William Westmoreland had pursued in Vietnam. With Petraeus’ arrival as head of the Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), US military strategy finally began shifting from “capture and kill” to providing security for the Iraqi population, especially in Baghdad. The new approach, which Petraeus evolved with his Department of State partner, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, appears to have succeeded for a number of reasons. Besides the five-brigade surge in 2007, the turnaround in Iraq was greatly facilitated by other developments.²³ Even before the surge, al Qaeda’s alienation of the population in areas such as Anbar province had begun motivating the Sunnis to change sides; improved intelligence and techniques for population control helped the US identify and target key elements of the insurgency; Moqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army stood down; Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began weakening Shia militias; and the Iraqi Army’s effectiveness improved.²⁴ The rapid turnaround in Iraq associated with the new strategy reinforces the view that the United States embarked on regime change in Iraq without adequately preparing for the protracted rebuilding phase that followed major combat operations; it took nearly four years to develop what appears to be a winning strategy.²⁵

The strategic problems associated with the US effort to effect regime change in Iraq do not, by themselves, prove that American strategic performance has, on the whole, been deteriorating for decades. Again, the United States did win the Cold War, and US strategic performance since the country’s defeat in Vietnam has not been uniformly poor. For instance, the 1975 Helsinki Accords contained human rights provisions that were strongly supported by the administration of President Jimmy Carter. In the early 1980s, the organizations that emerged to monitor Soviet and East European compliance with the agreement’s human rights provisions appear to have played a role in staying a Soviet decision to suppress the independent Solidarity movement in Poland with armed force, as Moscow had done in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. President Ronald Regan’s defense buildup, including his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), raised further problems for the Soviets. Indeed, after its announcement in 1983, constraining SDI became “the single most important object of Soviet

²³ Peter Mansoor, “How the Surge Worked,” *The Washington Post*, August 10, 2008, p. B7; John A. Nagl, “This Time, Things Are Looking Up,” *The Washington Post*, Sunday Outlook, September 14, 2008, p. B4; Matthew Kaminski, “Why the Surge Worked,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2008, at <<http://sec.online.wsj.com/article/SB122186492076758643.html>>; and, Hamid Hussain, “Courageous Colonels,” *Small Wars Journal*, posted December 23, 2008, online at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/12/courageous-colonels-current-hi/>>.

²⁴ Linda Robinson, “He Came, He Cut Deals, He (May) Conquer,” *The Washington Post*, Sunday Outlook, September 14, 2008, pp. B1, B4.

²⁵ Donald P. Wright, Colonel Timothy R. Reese, and the Contemporary Operations Study Team, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign, The United States Army in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM May 2003–January 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, June 2008), pp. 567–574.

diplomacy and covert action” as well as evidence of “the desperate need to modernize the economy if the Soviet Union was to remain a militarily competitive superpower.”²⁶ And the covert US effort to arm the mujahedeen in Afghanistan—“Charlie Wilson’s war”—did eventually force the Soviets to withdraw.²⁷ Thus there have been intermittent bright spots in US strategic performance since the late 1960s. Nonetheless, when the strategic mistakes in Iraq are placed alongside those made in Vietnam, the deterioration in US strategic performance appears to predate 9/11 by decades. “Capture and kill” was a serial repeat of “search and destroy.” Even if the strategy of trying to reshape the Middle East by planting a somewhat democratic regime in a region where there had been none is ultimately vindicated, OIF exhibited many mistakes in implementation and a reluctance to adjust US strategy.

Another reason for suspecting that the overall trend in US strategic performance has been negative stems from the focus of public US strategy documents. The 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2006 editions of the national security strategy of the United States all appear to be little more than lists of eminently desirable goals with hardly a hint as to how they might be achieved under existing resource constraints and in the face of active opposition from American adversaries. Take The National Security Strategy of the United States of America published in 2002, roughly a year after 9/11. The document starts, logically enough, with an appraisal of the United States’ position in the world. Totalitarianism had been decisively defeated and the United States found itself in “a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence.”²⁸ The strategy prescription that emerged from this appraisal was to capitalize on American strength and influence to create a long peace and a “balance of power” favoring conditions in which all nations and all societies could “choose for themselves the rewards and challenges of political and economic liberty.”²⁹ But how was this desideratum to be achieved? The answer offered was that the United States would achieve its ultimate objective by:

- > championing aspirations for human dignity;
- > strengthening alliances to defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends;
- > working with others to defuse regional conflicts;
- > preventing our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends, with weapons of mass destruction;

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²⁶ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 539.

²⁷ See George Crille, *Charlie Wilson’s War* (New York: Grove Press, 2003). Wilson was the Texas congressman who almost single-handedly found ways to fund the Central Intelligence Agency’s campaign to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan by arming the mujahedeen.

²⁸ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 17, 2002, p. iii.

²⁹ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2002, p. iii.

- > igniting a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade;
- > expanding the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy;
- > developing agendas for cooperative action with other main centers of global power; and
- > transforming America's national security institutions to meet the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century.³⁰

These answers, however, are not really coherent strategies but a list of sub-goals that, if achieved, might underpin the achievement of the broader goal of achieving a balance of power favoring human freedom.

The 1998, 2000, and 2006 national security strategies exhibit a similar tendency to list goals without going into much detail as to how they might be achieved in a practical sense. Further, this pattern is not limited to national security strategy documents written by civilian political appointees. The same regrettable tendency can be observed in Joint Chiefs of Staffs documents, including "Joint Vision 2010" in 1996 and "Joint Vision 2020" in 2000. Their call for "full-spectrum dominance" based on "dominant maneuver," "precision engagement," "focused logistics," and "full-dimensional protection" are more desiderata than strategies.³¹ Similarly, the emphasis on ends versus means can also be seen in the Joint Chiefs of Staff's 2004 "National Military Strategy of the United States of America: A Strategy for Today; A Vision for Tomorrow."

Of course, one must be cautious about jumping to the conclusion that the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both tended to mistake lists of desirable goals for actual strategies offering some prospect of succeeding in light of resource constraints and the opposing efforts of thinking adversaries. The documents in question, it should be recalled, are public strategy documents. Particularly in the case of the Bush administration, it is possible that the missing specificity on real-world implementation may exist in still-classified National Security Presidential Directives (NSPDs) such as NSPD-9 ("Defeating the Terrorist Threat to the United States") or NSPD-46 ("U.S. Strategy and Policy in the War on Terror").³² After all, the Eisenhower administration's NSC-162/2 as well as the Truman administration's NSC-68 ("United States Objectives and Programs for National Security") were classified TOP SECRET,

³⁰ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2002, pp. 1–2.

³¹ "Joint Vision 2020," May 2000, pp. 2–3.

³² The website of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) contains a list of nearly sixty NSPDs, including titles and dates for the majority of them (see <<http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdp/index.html>>). According to the FAS listing, NSPD-9 was signed on October 25, 2001, and NSPD-46 on March 6, 2006.

for the excellent reason that it is generally unwise to reveal one's strategy in all its particulars to the other side.

Still, over any period of time, the broad thrust of one's strategy cannot be entirely concealed from the enemy. In the case of the Truman administration's strategy of containment, the basic concept was published by Kennan in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947 and was endlessly debated in public thereafter. Much the same thing occurred with Eisenhower's strategy of massive nuclear retaliation. The Soviets could hardly have been oblivious to the buildup of Strategic Air Command's bomber force during the 1950s, and they plainly were not. As for OIF, the fact remains that the United States' national security establishment failed to settle on a coherent strategy for Iraq until late 2006. Thus, recurring American difficulties with "doing strategy" predate not only the collapse of the Soviet Union but President Richard Nixon's efforts to achieve peace with honor in Vietnam.

Putting aside the public national security documents of the last two administrations, what can be reasonably concluded about strategy? Strategy involves more than enumerating what one hopes to achieve: it entails crafting plausible ways of achieving one's ultimate goals despite limited resources, despite political and other constraints, and despite the best efforts of opponents to prevail in achieving their own ends. As Richard Betts observed prior to 9/11 and the ill-named "war on terror": "Among practitioners, politicians often conflate strategy with policy objectives (focusing on what the desired outcome should be, simply assuming that forces will move the adversary toward it), while soldiers often conflate strategy with operations (focusing on how to destroy targets or defeat enemies tactically, assuming that positive military effects mean positive political effects)."³³ While this tendency to conflate ends and means may be understandable, it is an error nonetheless and points to the need for a clearer understanding of what strategy actually is.

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³³ Richard K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security*, Fall 2000, p. 7.



CHAPTER 2 > WHAT IS STRATEGY?

...in general, strategy as contrasted with tactics deals with the coordination of activities at the higher levels of organizations. Strategy also focuses on longer-term goals and reflects a cast of mind that focuses on shaping the future rather than simply reacting to it.

— Andrew W. Marshall, 1991³⁴

The quintessential strategy story is of unexpected strength brought against discovered weakness. Not simply the deft wielding of power, but the actual discovery of power in a situation, an insight into a decisive asymmetry.

— Richard Rumelt, 2004³⁵

...strategy is about managing the slow-moving variables—the things that condition the options that actually appear in the course of history.

— Sidney Winter, 2008³⁶

What, then, is strategy and how should we think about it? From a national security perspective, our primary interest is in strategy in competitive situations involving the threatened or actual use of military force. Within the US military, most definitions of strategy hark back to the Prussian soldier and theorist Carl von Clausewitz, who defined strategy in his 1832 classic *Vom Kriege* [On War] as “the use of

³⁴ Andrew W. Marshall, “Strategy as a Profession for Future Generations,” in Andrew W. Marshall, J. J. Martin, and Henry S. Rowen (eds.), *On Not Confusing Ourselves: Essays on National security Strategy in Honor of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 303. Marshall has been the Pentagon’s Director of Net Assessment since October 1973.

³⁵ Richard P. Rumelt, unpublished manuscript for a book to be titled *Hard Won*, dated 2004, p. 1 (used with the author’s permission). Rumelt holds the Harry and Elsa Kunin Chair in Business and Society at UCLA’s Anderson School of Management.

³⁶ Sidney G. Winter, taped interview by Barry D. Watts and Mie Augier, December 17, 2008. Winter is the Deloitte and Touche professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.

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engagements for the object of the war.”³⁷ The latest edition of the Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) dictionary of military terms, for example, defines strategy as a “prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.”³⁸ A somewhat more succinct formulation of this Clausewitzian formulation is Colin Gray’s 1999 definition of strategy as “the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy,” which is very close to Richard Betts’ 2000 formulation of strategy as “the link between military means and political ends, the scheme for how to make one produce the other.”³⁹

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these traditional definitions of military strategy so long as one recognizes their limitations. First, strategy is neither limited to military affairs nor to competitive situations. It makes as much sense to talk about strategy in chess or business as it does in the context of states using military force, or the threat of force, to achieve their political objectives relative to other states or even transnational terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda. Similarly, one can devise and pursue strategies in non-competitive situations. Prior to its breakup in 1984, American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) was a government-regulated monopoly. During its monopoly phase, AT&T pursued telecommunications strategies aimed at providing reliable telephone service while maintaining profitability, and this use of the term “strategy” is perfectly legitimate. Recall that the transistor was invented in 1947 at AT&T’s Bell Laboratories in hopes of being able to amplify telephone signals more reliably and efficiently than was possible with vacuum tubes. In such non-competitive situations, strategy can be generally thought of as “the irreversible commitment of resources to create or build an envisioned future.”⁴⁰ Thus, strategy as a concept is certainly not limited to military competition or conflict between states, and some broadening of traditional definitions of military strategy seems necessary to cover business and chess as readily as war.

The other limitation of traditional definitions of military strategy is that they offer little insight concerning how one might actually go about “doing” strategy as a practical endeavor. Based on long experience with business strategy in competitive situations, Richard Rumelt defines strategy as a heuristic approach to a problem that usually stems from “an insight that creates or exploits a decisive asymmetry.”⁴¹ He

³⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 128 (*italics* in Paret and Howard reflecting the emphasis in the original German). Clausewitz died in 1831 and his widow, Marie, published the first edition of *Vom Kriege* in 1832.

³⁸ DoD, Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 12 April 2001 (as amended through 13 June 2007), p. 514.

³⁹ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 17 (*italics* in the original); Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” p. 5.

⁴⁰ Richard P. Rumelt, “Some Thoughts on Business Strategy,” PowerPoint presentation for a CSBA strategy seminar, September 25, 2007, slide 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

adds, echoing Charles Hitch and Roland McKean, that strategic choice is always conditioned by the overall problems of resource quality and scarcity.

The crucial element of Rumelt's working definition of business strategy is the notion of a heuristic or guess. Because the course of events in competitive situations is not precisely predictable, one cannot know with certainty how one's chosen strategy will work out in the long run. Here Rumelt insists on the literal truth of the Arab proverb he first heard from the scenario planner Pierre Wack: He who predicts the future lies, even if he tells the truth.⁴² For this reason, the strategist's situation is fundamentally different from the engineer's. Engineering problems deal with physical laws and regularities, which means they can have genuine solutions. In war or business a given strategy may succeed, but then again it may not—especially if one has overlooked important features of the situation or the opponent responds with an effective counter-strategy. Strategies, consequently, are always conditional, hostage to how events play out in the unpredictable future, and subject to unforeseen changes in the nature of the competitive environment.

Another important distinction Rumelt makes is that strategy formulation is distinct from strategic planning. Planning is about the coordination of resources in time and space, and by type, in order to implement a strategy.⁴³

Most corporate strategic plans have little to do with strategy. They are simply three-year or five-year rolling resource budgets and some sort of market share projection.⁴⁴

Or, as business strategist Henry Mintzberg has put it, strategic planning “has really been strategic programming, the articulation and elaboration of strategies, or visions, that already exist.”⁴⁵ While careful strategic planning should not be denigrated or ignored, it is quite different from the ability of a talented strategist to see deeper into the possibilities and probabilities of a competitive situation than the adversary and, as a result, hit on a strategy that is likely to succeed. Strategic planning may be necessary to implement a strategic design—especially at the national level—but it need not be either long-term or reflect genuine insight into a competitive situation. Strategy is about insight, creativity and synthesis. Strategic planning, by contrast, is about the analytic processes of “breaking down a goal or set of intentions into steps, formalizing

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⁴² Wack, along with Edward “Ted” Newland, were godfathers of scenario planning at Royal Dutch/Shell in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Pierre Wack, “Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead,” *Harvard Business Review*, September–October 1985, pp. 73–89; and “Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids,” *Harvard Business Review*, November–December 1985, pp. 2–14. In 1982 Peter Schwartz succeeded Wack as Royal Dutch/Shell's head of scenario planning. Schwartz's 1996 *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* is one of the classics of scenario planning.

⁴³ Rumelt, “Some Thoughts on Business Strategy,” slide 6.

⁴⁴ Dan P. Lovallo and Lenny T. Mendonca, “Strategy's Strategist: An Interview with Richard Rumelt,” *The McKinsey Quarterly*, August 2007, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Henry Mintzberg, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 1994, p. 107 (*italics* in the original). Mintzberg is the Cleghorn Professor of Management Studies at McGill University in Montreal.

those steps so that they can be implemented almost automatically, and articulating the anticipated consequences or results of each step.”⁴⁶ Strategy, therefore, should not be conflated with strategic planning.

The distinction between strategy and strategic planning leads to another insight. In a 1973 book on grand strategy, John Collins observed that, although

... strategy is a game that anyone can play, it is not a game that just anyone can play well. Only the most gifted participants have much chance to win a prize.⁴⁷

By the time most individuals reach their early twenties, they either have developed the cognitive skills for strategy or they have not.

Recent work by neuroscientists Mark Jung-Beeman, John Kounios and others has identified the kind of preparatory mechanisms and the specific portions of the brain utilized during sudden “Aha!” moments of insight.⁴⁸ Indeed, their research reveals that subjects who were unable to solve problems requiring the insight of sudden “Aha!” moments were unable to solve them at all.⁴⁹ Elitist though this may sound, it appears that by the time most individuals reach their early twenties, they either have developed the cognitive skills for strategy or they have not. Collins’ observation, based on years of experience with National War College students, is that the majority have not—not even among field-grade military officers with the potential for flag (general officer or admiral) rank. US success with realistic tactical training since the founding of the US Navy’s TOPGUN Fighter Weapons School in 1968 has demonstrated that the most soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines can achieve proficiency in making sound tactical decisions in time-pressured combat situations. But the cognitive skills for intuitive responses to tactical problems based on rapid pattern recognition are

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴⁷ John M. Collins, *Grand Strategy: Principles and Practices* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), p. 235 (*italics in original*).

⁴⁸ John Kounios, Jennifer L. Frymaire, Edward M. Bowden, Jessica I. Fleck, Karauna Subramaniam, Todd B. Parris, and Mark Jung-Beeman, “The Prepared Mind: Neural Activity Prior to Problem Presentation Predicts Subsequent Solution by Sudden Insight,” *Psychological Science*, Vol. 17, No. 10, 2006, pp. 882–890.

⁴⁹ Jonah Lehrer, “The Eureka Hunt,” *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2008, p. 41. The example of strategic insight Lehrer cites at the beginning of this article recounts how Wag Dodge, a firefighter, survived being overtaken by a 1949 Montana wildfire whose direction had suddenly changed. Realizing he was not going to be able to outrun the advancing wall of flames, Dodge stopped running, lit a match and ignited the ground in front of him, lay down on the smoldering embers with a wet handkerchief over his mouth, and waited for the fire to pass over him. While thirteen other smoke jumpers died in Mann Gulch that afternoon, Dodge emerged virtually unscathed (*ibid.*, p. 40). A wartime example is the insight of Generals Dwight Eisenhower and Bernard L. Montgomery’s insight that, to have a chance of succeeding, the Normandy invasion would require substantially more assault brigades and airborne forces attacking a larger sector of coast than envisioned in the preliminary plan—Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 217, 219.

functionally distinct from those associated with strategic insight, and there is every reason to think that they are neurologically distinct as well.⁵⁰

If this is correct, then professional education or training are unlikely to inculcate a capacity for genuine strategic insight into most individuals, regardless of their raw intelligence or prior experience. Instead, the best anyone can do is to try to identify those who appear to have developed this talent and then make sure that they are utilized in positions calling for the skills of a strategist. The British defense establishment uses its Higher Command and Staff Course (HCSC) to identify individuals who display such cognitive abilities, but unfortunately the US military lacks any similar mechanism for identifying potential strategists.⁵¹

What, then, is strategy? In light of these various observations and insights, a pragmatic characterization is as follows:

Strategy is fundamentally about identifying or creating asymmetric advantages that can be exploited to help achieve one's ultimate objectives despite resource and other constraints, most importantly the opposing efforts of adversaries or competitors and the inherent unpredictability of strategic outcomes.

This is not, of course, the usual definition of strategy. However, it has the considerable merit of applying as readily to chess or a business firm competing against other firms for profits and market share as it does to military competition during peacetime or war. More importantly, it goes beyond the traditional definitions of military strategy by indicating how one actually goes about doing strategy. At its core, strategy is about finding asymmetries in competitive situations that can be exploited to one's advantage. This perspective also suggests why good strategy is so difficult. Very few among us possess the cognitive skills for genuine strategic insight.

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⁵⁰ For a functional map of human cognition based on meticulous, physics-like experimentation, see Daniel Kahneman, "Maps of Bounded Rationality: A Perspective on Intuitive Judgment and Choice," Nobel Prize lecture, December 8, 2002, in Tore Frängsmyr (ed.), *The Nobel Prizes 2002* (Stockholm: Nobel Foundation, 2003), pp. 450–452. Kahneman's partner in working out their two-system view of human cognition was Amos Tversky, who died in 1996.

⁵¹ Strictly speaking, the British use the HCSC to identify individuals who can make the transition from tactics to operational art. But since the cognitive skills required for strategy appear to be the same as those for operational art, those who can make the transition are also potential strategists.



CHAPTER 3 > DOES STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE MATTER?

Strategy is the essential ingredient for making war either politically effective or morally tenable.... Without strategy, there is no rationale for how force will achieve purposes worth the price in blood and treasure. Without strategy, power is a loose cannon and war is mindless....

Because strategy is necessary, however, does not mean that it is possible. Those who experience or study many wars find strong reasons to doubt that strategists can know enough about causes, effects, and intervening variables to make the operations planned produce the outcomes desired.

—Richard Betts, 2000⁵²

What historical evidence supports the proposition that it is important to try to do strategy well rather than poorly or not at all? This question assumes that strategy is possible, and not merely an illusion. Before turning to the case of Anglo-American and German strategy in Europe during World War II, the academic objections to the very possibility of strategy raised by Richard Betts need to be addressed.

Among practitioners, one of the more outspoken strategy skeptics in recent decades has been Samuel P. “Sandy” Berger, who was President Bill Clinton’s national security advisor from 1997 to 2001. In Berger’s opinion, most “grand strategies” are after-the-fact rationalizations proffered to explain successful ad hoc decisions; for this reason, his expressed preference was to “worry about today today and tomorrow tomorrow.”⁵³ Berger’s skepticism about strategy notwithstanding, two national security strategy documents appeared during his tenure as Clinton’s national security advisor. Moreover, the elements of strategy of engagement in these documents—adapting alliances; encouraging the reorientation of other states, including former adversaries; encouraging democratization, open markets, free trade, and sustainable

⁵² Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” p. 5.

⁵³ R. W. Apple, Jr., “A Domestic Sort with Global Worries,” *The New York Times*, August 25, 1999, p. A10.

Academic
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strategy is an
illusion insist
that strategies
and their
implementation
be optimal.

development; preventing conflict; countering potential region aggressors; confronting new threats; and steering international peace and stability operations — appear to conflate strategy with desirable ends.⁵⁴

In his 2000 article “Is Strategy an Illusion?” Richard Betts articulated no fewer than ten different objections to the possibility of strategy. The first two question the ability of national leaders to forecast and assess the costs and likely outcomes of their strategic choices. Betts’ third, fourth, and fifth objections deal with the inability of national leaders to optimize their aims because they misunderstand what is at issue in a given competition or war. The sixth and seventh highlight the frictional and bureaucratic constraints to effective implementation, the eighth dealt with the tendency of the adversary, or war itself, to derange strategy, and the ninth and tenth cover the special limitations democracies face in trying to formulate and implement efficacious strategies. In each instance, Betts not only posed an objection to strategy’s possibility but endeavored to provide responses aimed at salvaging the possibility of strategy. Though not entirely satisfied with all his counter-arguments, he nevertheless concluded that while sensible strategy is not impossible, “it is usually difficult and risky, and what works in one case may not in another than seems similar.”⁵⁵

The common thread in Betts’ ten reasons why strategy may be an illusion is an underlying insistence on rational calculation and optimization. At the heart of all ten objections is the concern that strategy, for one reason or another, cannot meet the traditional Western standard of rationality. According to this line of argument, for strategy to be possible, it must satisfy “a universal economic calculus based on conscious maximization of benefit relative to cost” — whether in advance, when a specific strategy is chosen, or after the fact, once its ultimate outcome is known.⁵⁶ Thus, academic strategists who argue that strategy is an illusion insist that strategies and their implementation be optimal.

But isn’t this insistence simply demanding that strategy meet an impossible standard of performance? If the ultimate outcomes of our strategic choices are, in reality, indeterminate and contingent, then there is scant likelihood that they will be utility-maximizing across costs, benefits, and the risks run. Outcomes in war, as Clausewitz rightly observed, arise from “an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad” that makes war, in the whole range of human activities, most closely resemble “a game of cards.”⁵⁷ Moreover, there is now considerable support for Clausewitz’s view even among economists. As Herbert Simon pointed out in the 1950s, the economists’ classic standard of optimal choices based on rational calculation is incompatible “with the access to information and the computational capacities that are actually

⁵⁴ The White House, “A National Security Strategy for a Global Age,” December 2000.

⁵⁵ Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” p. 48.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 86. Clausewitz also insisted that even the ultimate outcome of a war “is not always to be regarded as final” (ibid., p. 89).

possessed by organisms, including man.”⁵⁸ Instead, while organisms, including strategic decision-makers, adapt well enough to “satisfice” by making satisfying and sufficient choices, they do not, in general, “optimize.”⁵⁹ Rationality, as Simon put it, is “bounded,” especially when making strategic choices under the pressure of unfolding events with limited information, not all of which may be accurate. Consequently, so long as strategy is not held to an impossible standard of perfection, it is not only possible but unavoidable to the extent that people cannot avoid making strategic choices. Indeed, reacting to national security challenges by merely muddling through, as Berger would advise, is itself a strategic choice, though not perhaps the wisest one.

If strategy is not an illusion, can one point to cases in which inferior strategic choices by one side compared to those made by the other side appear to have affected the global outcome? Before trying to answer this question with a specific historical instance, one caveat must be mentioned concerning the dependence of outcomes on contingencies. Consider the largely bloodless manner and rapidity with which the Soviet Union collapsed from 1989 to 1991. This specific outcome cannot be plausibly attributed to any single cause, and some of its causes were contingent—matters of chance rather than inevitability. One of the most critical, as Walter Laqueur has emphasized, was the Politburo’s election of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union following Konstantin Chernenko’s death in March 1985.⁶⁰ Granted, the decline of the Soviet economy, which began mobilizing after the Korean War and remained on a war-footing from the Cuban missile crisis to the Cold War’s end, probably doomed the USSR in the long run.⁶¹ But the speed and exact way in which Soviet power unraveled from 1989 to 1991 surely depended on Gorbachev’s elevation to general secretary, and the policies—particularly glasnost and perestroika—that he and his advisors subsequently adopted. Gorbachev’s hope was that Communist rule “could be reformed, made more competent, and sustained” in conjunction with reviving the Soviet economy “while preserving central control, industrial socialism, and collectivized agriculture”; in execution, however, his policies triggered a series of events that spun out of his control, ultimately destroying Soviet power.⁶² So while causal linkages between particular strategies and ultimate outcomes may well exist, the complete causal history tends to be too complex for the role of any single causal thread among all the others to be laid bare, even with considerable historical hindsight. The best that one can generally do in citing historical

So long as strategy is not held to an impossible standard of perfection, it is not only possible but unavoidable to the extent that people cannot avoid making strategic choices.

⁵⁸ Herbert A. Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, February 1955, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Herbert A. Simon, “Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment,” *Psychological Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2, 1956, p. 129.

⁶⁰ Walter Laqueur, *The Dream That Failed: Reflections on the Soviet Union* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 74–75, 100.

⁶¹ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), p. 371; Laqueur, *The Dream That Failed*, p. 147.

⁶² Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 508.

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cases in which strategy performance appears to have been important in the ultimate outcomes is to highlight correlations rather than exact causality.

With this caution in mind, perhaps the most persuasive instance of strategic performance affecting the overall outcome can be seen in comparing Anglo-American and German strategic performance in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) from 1942 to 1945. To begin with, Germany's defeat in the West poses something of a conundrum because of the tactical superiority the Germans had over the Allies in fighting power and how narrow the margin of Allied victory was in many of the key battles from 1943 to 1945. The best indication of German fighting power comes from Trevor N. Dupuy's analysis of some sixty World War II battles (mainly in Italy in 1943 and 1944).⁶³ This analysis led him to conclude in 1977 that:

In 1943–1944 the German combat effectiveness superiority over the Western Allies (Americans and British) was in the order of 20–30 percent. On a man-for-man basis, the German ground soldiers consistently inflicted casualties at about a 50 percent higher rate than they incurred from British and American troops under all circumstances. This was true when they were attacking and when they were defending, when they had local numerical superiority and when, as was usually the case, they were outnumbered, when they had air superiority and when they did not, when they won and when they lost.⁶⁴

On the Eastern Front, German superiority over the Soviet Army was even more pronounced:

German combat effectiveness over the Russians in the early days of the war was close to 200 percent; this means that, on the average, one German division was at least a match for three Russian divisions of comparable size and firepower, and that under favorable circumstances of defense, one German division theoretically could—and often actually did—hold off as many as seven comparable Russian divisions. In 1944 this superiority was still nearly 100 percent and the average German frontline soldier inflicted 7.78 Russian casualties for each German lost.⁶⁵

Yet, despite these advantages in combat effectiveness, Germany lost the Second World War. Why?

The popular answer has been that the Germans were overwhelmed by the Allies' superiority in manpower and matériel. During the war Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan mobilized 12.5 and 7.4 million, respectively, for a total of 19.9 million while the United States (14.9 million), the British Commonwealth (6.2 million), and the Soviet

⁶³ See Colonel T. N. Dupuy, *Numbers, Prediction and War: The Use of History to Evaluate and Predict the Outcome of Armed Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: HERO Books, rev. ed. 1985), pp. 234–236.

⁶⁴ Colonel T. N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807–1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), pp. 253–254.

⁶⁵ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, p. 254.

Union (25 million) mobilized a total of 46.1 million.⁶⁶ The Allies produced more than three times as many aircraft of all types as Germany and Japan, and almost eight times as many artillery pieces as Germany; only in tanks and self-propelled artillery did Germany and Japan approach US, British, and Soviet output from 1939 to 1945 (197,274 versus 224,107 for the Allies).⁶⁷ From 1940 through 1945, the American “arsenal of democracy” alone produced 98,431 bombers, 100,708 fighters, 88,410 tanks, 30 large aircraft carriers, 116 escort carriers, and 84,198 landing craft.⁶⁸

Yet these quantitative advantages alone do not suffice to explain Allied victory in World War II. To understand the causes of Germany’s defeat, it is best to start with the Eastern Front, where over four hundred German and Soviet divisions fought along a front more than a thousand miles long, and where four in every five German soldiers killed in combat from 1939 to 1945 died.⁶⁹ The Soviet victories at Stalingrad (December 1942–January 1943) and Kursk (July 1943) were crucial to the Allies’ eventual defeat of Nazi Germany, but debate over the reasons for these victories persists. “The conventional view has been to blame Hitler for gross strategic mismanagement, or to ascribe Soviet success to crude weight of numbers.”⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Soviet victories in 1943 were due to more than Hitler’s mistakes and Russian numbers. The remarkable resurgence of the Red Army’s fighting power by 1943 reflected the almost fanatical willingness of Soviet soldiers to die for the Russian motherland (родина), and the growing capabilities of the Russian High Command (Ставка) and field commanders “to deploy millions of men and thousands of tanks and aircraft, with all their supplies and rearward services, in lengthy and complex operations, without losing control of them.”⁷¹

If anything, it is even less plausible to attribute Allied success in Africa, the Mediterranean and northwestern Europe from 1942 to 1945 to German inferiority in manpower and materiel. “The history of war is littered with examples of smaller, materially disadvantaged states defeating a larger, richer enemy.”⁷² Furthermore, the narrowness of the margins by which the Allies prevailed in key battles in the ETO

⁶⁶ Andrew Rogers, *Masters and Commanders: How Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Alanbrooke Won the War in the West* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 85–86.

⁶⁷ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1995), pp. 331–332.

⁶⁸ Alan L. Gropman, *Mobilizing U.S. Industry in World War II: Myth and Reality* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996), McNair Paper 50, p. 96.

⁶⁹ Rogers, *Masters and Commanders*, pp. 276, 573.

⁷⁰ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, p. 98.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 99. For first-hand confirmation of Overy’s assessment, see Major General F. W. von Mellen-thin, trans. H. Betzler, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), pp. 247, 265, 293, 295. See, also, Boris Solovyov, trans. Robert Daglish, *The Turning Point of World War II (The Campaigns of Summer and Autumn 1943 on the Soviet-German Front)* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), pp. 72–75, 80–81; and David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), pp. 122–123, 127–137.

⁷² Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, p. 317.

highlights the importance of how these battles were won and the strategies behind them. Particularly during the middle years of the World War II, “the conflict was poised on a knife-edge.”⁷³ The Allied landings at Salerno south of Naples (September 1943) and at Anzio south of Rome (January 1944), for example, both succeeded by the narrowest of margins.⁷⁴ As for the Normandy landings (Operation Overlord) on June 6, 1944, there seems little doubt that, despite Allied control of the air and sea, the Germans had sufficient ground forces in France to have pushed the invaders back into the sea during the first ninety-six hours, had they been more decisive and had they been not misled by the Allied deception plan (Operation Fortitude) that kept Hitler focused on the Pas-de-Calais as the primary invasion site.⁷⁵ If the five panzer divisions north of the Loire River had been dispatched to Normandy before June 8, they “might have driven the invaders into the sea.”⁷⁶ But by the fifth day Eisenhower had sixteen Allied divisions ashore facing ten German divisions, and the Germans’ opportunity to dislodge the invaders had passed.

Nor did Eisenhower, as late as September 1944, have sufficient ground forces — particularly front-line infantry — to overwhelm the Germans in the West through sheer weight of numbers.⁷⁷ Not widely remembered is that by the time most of France had been liberated and Eisenhower’s eastward advance began stalling along the Siegfried Line, the Germans not only outnumbered Eisenhower’s combat troops but their margin of advantage on the ground was growing.⁷⁸ Further, General George Marshall’s “end the war directive” made it clear that he and Roosevelt were not disposed to meet Eisenhower’s requests for additional divisions.⁷⁹ Especially in light of the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes (Operation Herbstnebel or Autumn Mist) that began on December 16 and nearly reached the Meuse River, there are scant grounds for explaining Allied victory in the West in 1944–1945 on the basis of Eisenhower’s

⁷³ Ibid., p. 325.

⁷⁴ Mark Perry, *Partners in Command: George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), pp. 217–224, 272–276.

⁷⁵ David Eisenhower, *Eisenhower: At War 1943–1945* (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 274, 285–287, 291.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 290.

⁷⁷ In the fall of 1944, Eisenhower faced a growing shortage of infantrymen, especially those that normally operate in front of the light artillery lines of divisions and were absorbing 90 percent of the casualties (Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 344).

⁷⁸ Eisenhower, *Eisenhower: At War 1943–1945*, p. 499; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 322; Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1963), pp. 5, 382–389.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 496–497; Perry, *Partners in Command*, p. 332.

superiority in troop strength.⁸⁰ In the case of Operation Herbstnebel, Eisenhower responded quickly to the crisis, the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne refused to surrender despite being surrounded, and General George Patton's Third Army was able to turn north and drive into the Germans' flank. And once the weather broke clear and cold over the Ardennes on December 23 permitting Allied air power to get into the fight, Hitler's final gamble in the West was doomed by the advantage powerful and efficient air forces gave the Allied armies.⁸¹

Richard Overy's conclusion on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II was that the Allies prevailed in Europe because "they turned their economic strength into effective fighting power" and "the moral energies of their people into an effective will to win."⁸² Viewed in isolation, this summary judgment is easily misread as overlooking the role played by strategy. In the ETO, Anglo-American grand strategy was largely argued out among four men: Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, George Marshall and Alan Brooke. The British and Americans formulated their global blueprint for how to win the war at the Arcadia Conference, which took place in Washington, DC, from December 22, 1941, to January 14, 1942. Arcadia established a "Germany first" strategy based on the insight that "the defeat of Germany would make the defeat of Japan a matter of time, whereas the defeat of Japan would not materially weaken Germany."⁸³

Having settled on "Germany first," the next issue that the two political "masters" and the two military "commanders" had to settle was how exactly to go about defeating Germany. General Marshall argued from the beginning, and Eisenhower agreed, that Germany's defeat would require a cross-Channel invasion of northern France followed by a direct advance into Germany aimed at confronting "the Wehrmacht head on in France and Germany, and by capturing the Ruhr and Saar deny Hitler the

⁸⁰ The matter of the Allies' numerical advantages in ground-force equipment is trickier to assess. In the case of tanks, by the fall of 1944 the Allies had almost a fourfold numerical advantage in the ETO (Perry, *Partners in Command*, p. 329). However, the principal US tank, the Sherman M4, was inferior in armor protection and the penetrating power of its main gun to the German Tigers and Panthers—David E. Johnson, *Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers: Innovation in the U.S. Army 1917–1945* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 193–201. It was not unknown for a Tiger to withstand twenty-five frontal hits from Shermans but be able to knock out the M-4 with a single hit (*ibid.*, p. 185).

⁸¹ Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 323. Though Eisenhower never believed that air power alone could defeat Germany, he was equally convinced that Overlord would have been "exceedingly risky" without Allied control of the air (*ibid.*, p. 65). As for German inferiority in the air in the fall of 1943, the Luftwaffe's problems were fundamentally operational rather than the numbers of aircraft being produced. German fighter production peaked in September 1944 (US Strategic Bombing Survey, *The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy*, October 31, 1945, p. 277). By then, the Luftwaffe's efforts to defend Germany against Allied bombers was crippled more by pilot losses and fuel shortages than by fighter production. Also worth remembering is that the Allied breakout from the Normandy landing areas went through a breach in German lines blasted by some 1,500 B-17s and B-24s (Eisenhower, *Eisenhower: At War 1943–1945*, p. 380).

⁸² Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, p. 325.

⁸³ Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, pp. 68–69, 86–87.

As difficult and protracted as the Anglo-American debate over grand strategy was, Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Brooke ultimately got their grand strategy right.

ability to fight on indefinitely.”⁸⁴ In 1942 and 1943, however, Churchill and Brooke managed to commit the Allies to a peripheral strategy aimed at weakening Germany before attempting Overlord. Brooke had experienced the superior fighting power of the German army firsthand in France in 1940, and he rightly believed that US forces and commanders needed to be “blooded” against the Germans before Overlord could be attempted. As a result, Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Brooke continued to debate Overlord’s timing into the fall of 1943, and both Churchill and Brooke entertained doubts as to the chances of Overlord succeeding long after they had committed themselves to going ahead with the cross-Channel invasion.⁸⁵ In the end, the British were right to insist on deferring Overlord until mid-1944. By that time, the Anglo-American campaigns in Africa, Sicily and Italy had battle-hardened US forces and commanders while pinning down substantial German forces in Italy; the Combined Bomber Offensive (intended to decimate German industry) had placed increasing stress on Germany’s war economy; the Allies had achieved air superiority over Western Europe; the German disasters at Stalingrad and Kursk had kept Russia in the war while further weakening the German army; and British and US forces had learned to fight together as an effective coalition. Given all this, Roosevelt and Marshall were right to insist on going ahead with Overlord in 1944 despite its considerable risks.

The critical point here is that, as difficult and protracted as the Anglo-American debate over grand strategy was, from the Arcadia conference in Washington to the November 1943 conference with the Russians in Teheran, Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Brooke ultimately got their grand strategy right. They committed no major blunders. Granted, “Brooke’s and Churchill’s campaign up to the Po Valley was largely a waste of effort after Rome, while Marshall’s and Roosevelt’s Operation Anvil/Dragoon [the Allied landings in southern France] was also largely a waste of time.”⁸⁶ But these were minor missteps compared to Adolf Hitler’s strategic blunders, some of which he repeated time after time. Hitler’s “no withdrawal” policies in Tunisia, Russia and Italy as well as his decisions to invade Russia and to pursue extermination

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 581; also Perry, *Partners in Command*, p. 109; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990 and 2003), pp. 121, 145; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, pp. 27–28, 46, 48, 168.

⁸⁵ Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, pp. 461, 463–464. The consideration at the heart of Churchill’s and Brooke’s fears about Overlord right up to the moment of the invasion was “their knowledge of the immense and extraordinary fighting power of the German army” — Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 24.

⁸⁶ Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 578.

campaigns against the Jews and Bolsheviks all appear to have been major strategic errors that have no parallels on the Anglo-American side.⁸⁷

Why was German strategic performance so poor compared to that of the Allies? Because Hitler, especially after he dismissed Field Marshall Walther von Brauchitsch in December 1941 and declared himself commander-in-chief, was not only able to overrule his generals and impose ruinous strategic decisions on them, but insisted on issuing orders that “went into the smallest and most trifling details.”⁸⁸ While Allied strategy in World War II was far from perfect, German strategy was far worse, and this strategic differential was surely a factor in the war’s ultimate outcome.

Again, one must resist attributing Allied victory in Western Europe exclusively, or even mostly, to superior Anglo-American strategic performance. True, the Germans ultimately lost, despite their tactical superiority on the ground, but the causes were many. Neither did Allied air power alone win World War II for the Allies, but “it proved to be the critical weakness on the Axis side and the greatest single advantage enjoyed by the Allies.”⁸⁹ It was the Luftwaffe’s failure to gain air superiority over the Royal Air Force in 1940 that precluded a German cross-Channel invasion of England and turned Hitler’s thoughts eastward, to Russia. While inferior strategic performance was not the sole cause of Germany’s defeat in World War II, it was a major factor in the final outcome. In this regard, German failure to develop heavy bomber forces comparable to the US Eighth Air Force or the British Bomber Command can be seen as yet another example of poor strategic choices under Hitler.

Strategy, then, is not only possible, but important to try to do well — or at least better than one’s opponents. This conclusion reinforces Feaver’s observation that while fractious democratic politics undoubtedly makes strategy hard to do, democratic politics may also give democracies a strategic edge over more authoritarian opponents, whether they be states like the People’s Republic of China or terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda. As Andrew Roberts has noted, German strategic choices during World War II were

not subjected to the kind of unsparing analysis that would undoubtedly have halted their adoption in a democracy. By complete contrast, the strategies of the Western Allies had to be exhaustively argued through the Planning Staff, General Staff, Chiefs of Staff and then Combined Chiefs of Staff levels, before they were even capable of being placed before the politicians, where they were debated in microscopic detail all over again.⁹⁰

While Allied strategy in World War II was far from perfect, German strategy was far worse, and this strategic differential was surely a factor in the war’s ultimate outcome.

⁸⁷ For more detailed examples of Hitler’s various mistakes, see von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, pp. 18–19, 123, 160, 163, 168, 211, 217–218, 240–241, 265–266, 272, 319, 339; also, Erich von Manstein, ed. and trans. Anthony G. Powell, *Lost Victories* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982), pp. 80, 124, 162, 175, 260, 273–274, 290, 307. For a summary of the mistakes made by Hitler that affected outcome of the Normandy landings, see David G. Chandler and James Lawton Collins, Jr., (eds.), *The D-Day Encyclopedia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 293–294.

⁸⁸ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, p. 358.

⁸⁹ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, pp. 322–323.

⁹⁰ Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 576.

Thus, Roberts certainly appears justified in concluding that the “lack of a collegiate Chiefs of Staff system was one of the major reasons the Germans lost the Second World War.”⁹¹ This system prevented the Allies from committing major strategic blunders and helped them to exploit areas of competitive advantage such as air and naval power. Strategy not only mattered in World War II, it mattered a great deal.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 575. In 1948 Eisenhower singled out two “miracles” that were critical causes of Germany’s surrender in May 1945. One was America’s transformation, in only three years, from a posture of military weakness to “unparalleled might in battle”; the other was the development “of near perfection” in the capacity of the United States and Great Britain to wage coalition warfare effectively (Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 4).

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



Joint Vision
2020

National Defense Strategy



MARCH 2006

June 2008



Joint Vision
2010



CHAPTER 4 > COMMON STRATEGY PITFALLS

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.

— Clausewitz, 1832⁹²

The basic principles of strategy are so simple that a child may understand them. But to determine their proper application to a given situation requires the hardest kind of work...

— Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1948⁹³

Why is there so much bad strategy?

— Richard Rumelt, 2007⁹⁴

While strategy is necessary and possible, and while one should strive to do it better than the opponent, it is nonetheless difficult. Evidence of ill-conceived, inadequately thought-through, poor, or simply bad strategies abounds. Based on his experience with business strategy, Rumelt has accumulated a list of what might be termed “common strategy sins.”

1. Failure to recognize or take seriously the fact that resources are scarce.
2. Mistaking strategic goals for strategy.
3. Failure to recognize or state the strategic problem.
4. Choosing unattainable or poor strategic goals.
5. Not defining the strategic challenge competitively.

⁹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119. This oft-quoted passage is, of course, from the chapter in Book I of *On War* titled *Friktion im Kriege* (Friction in War).

⁹³ Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, p. 36.

⁹⁴ Richard P. Rumelt, presentation transcribed by Barry Watts, CSBA strategy seminar, September 25, 2007.

6. Making false presumptions about one's own competence or the likely causal linkages between one's strategy and one's goals.
7. Insufficient focus on strategy due to such things as trying to satisfy too many different stakeholders or bureaucratic processes.⁹⁵

Rumelt's list can be expanded. Three additional recurring reasons for so much bad strategy are:

8. Inaccurately determining one's areas of comparative advantage relative to the opposition.
9. Failure to realize that very few individuals are likely to possess the cognitive skills and mindset to be competent strategists.
10. Failure to understand the adversary.

The first two of these strategy pitfalls (failure to recognize resource constraints, and confusing goals with strategies to achieve them) have already been discussed. They require only one further comment: ignoring resource constraints and confusing ends and means are hardly academic quibbles. Quite to the contrary, they are pitfalls that can cripple real-world strategic performance. As Hew Strachan observed in his 2005 review of US strategy in the Middle East following 9/11:

Kabul fell within 40 days. The United States had prevailed in Afghanistan (or so it seemed) without having had to formulate strategy. Action had generated its own results.... Planning for Iraq displayed a comparable under-appreciation of strategy. Clearly the US armed forces displayed their competence at the operational level of war in March–April 2003.... Theoretically they could see the campaign in strategic terms, with a planning cycle that embraced four phases—deterrence and engagement; seizing the initiative; decisive operations; and post-conflict operations. But strategy was driven out by the wishful thinking of their political masters, convinced that the United States would be welcomed as liberators, and determined that war and peace were opposites, not a continuum. This cast of mind prevented consideration of the war's true costs or the implications of occupation...⁹⁶

In hindsight, there is little doubt that in the aftermath of al Qaeda's attacks, US strategy in the "war on terror" was hobbled by the first two pitfalls listed.

The remainder of this section focuses on articulating some of the practical issues embedded in Rumelt's five other strategy sins, plus the three additions. The discussions of pitfalls #3 through #10 are brief. The intent is simply to illustrate that they represent genuine, real-world barriers to competent strategic performance.

⁹⁵ Rumelt, "Some Thoughts on Business Strategy," slide 11 (with some reordering and rewording).

⁹⁶ Hew Strachan, "The Lost Meaning of Strategy," *Survival*, Autumn 2005, p. 51.

FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE OR STATE THE STRATEGIC PROBLEM (#3). The common mistake here is to jump ahead too quickly to the actions one hopes or plans to carry out before having crisply stated the actual problem. The US Army's focus in Iraq on "capture and kill" from 2003 until at least 2006 is a case in point. The Army's natural institutional response to the insurgency was to begin hunting down the terrorists and insurgents. But embracing man-hunting as the main mission misunderstood the strategic challenge, which was, from the outset, to provide security for the Iraqi population (as longstanding counter-insurgency experience has shown time and again). Petraeus' subsequent success in coping with the Iraqi insurgency, therefore, stemmed in part from correctly diagnosing the strategic challenge confronting the United States in Iraq.

Important for strategists to keep constantly in mind, though, is that the problem can change over time. Ever since German aircraft sunk the Italian battleship *Roma* in September 1943 with early Fritz-X guided bombs, the US Navy has worried that surface combatants would become so vulnerable to enemy aircraft or long-range missiles that they would cease to be survivable when within reach of enemy precision-strike networks. Admittedly, this problem has taken a long time to mature into a serious threat to US carrier battle groups, although China's evolving anti-access/area-denial capabilities seem designed to "interdict or attack, at long ranges, military forces—particularly [US] air or maritime forces—that might deploy or operate within the western Pacific."⁹⁷ These capabilities, moreover, are part of a broader Chinese strategy to reshape the strategic landscape in the western Pacific that includes exploiting US vulnerabilities in space and intimidating US allies in the region. These sorts of gradual changes affecting the US position in Asia and the Pacific exemplify the "slow-moving variables," to borrow Sidney Winter's term, that tend to be ignored in developing strategies. It is also the sort of change that is especially difficult for large, bureaucratic institutions, such as the US military Services, to take into account.

Another aspect of the failure to recognize or state the strategic challenge is the possibility that the fundamental nature of the competitive environment may change in unexpected ways. Examples include the emergence of thermonuclear plenty for both the United States and the Soviet Union stemming from the development of the hydrogen bomb, the sharp spike in the price of a barrel of oil precipitated by the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and the abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. By the late 1960s, the marriage of thermonuclear plenty with intercontinental ballistic missiles rendered an all-out US-Soviet nuclear exchange suicidal for both societies. The 1973 oil shock ended the era in which oil companies could plan on low prices for a barrel of oil and expanding demand, and only Royal-Dutch/Shell, whose top managers had been enticed by Wack's scenario planning to think through the business implications of this "unlikely" competitive environment, were prepared to take advantage

Important for strategists to keep constantly in mind is that the problem can change over time.

⁹⁷ Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China," 2008, p. 23.

of the changed situation brought on by the 1973 War. Finally, the disappearance of the Soviet Union as a long-term, near-peer competitor undermined the threat-driven approach to force planning that the US military had relied upon since the late 1940s. Thus, both adversary responses and the nature of the competitive environment need be taken into account in defining the strategic problem competitively.

CHOOSING POOR OR UNATTAINABLE GOALS (#4). Closely related to the issue of correctly diagnosing the strategic problem is the temptation to adopt unattainable goals. Consider the post-9/11 threat of terrorist attacks on the US homeland. The natural impulse of the US government—at least in its public pronouncements—has been to embrace the comforting notion of stopping all terrorists at the borders, before they can get inside the country to attack relatively undefended or “soft” targets. But the resources to seal all US land and coastal borders simply do not exist, and a strategy built around this goal would give terrorists ample leverage to impose ruinous costs on the United States. This observation should not be interpreted as a suggestion that the Department of Homeland Security ought to neglect taking prudent, affordable steps to preclude easy entry into the United States by terrorists. Rather, the feasibility and costs of strategic goals need to be taken into account in crafting strategies.

NOT DEFINING THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGE COMPETITIVELY (#5). Here the cardinal sin is treating the adversary as an inert object without any capacity to think or respond in ways that can unravel or negate one’s own strategy. But the opponent, as the British general Rupert Smith has reminded us, “is not inert”; indeed, the adversary “has a free creative part” in the competition and, especially in war, is powerfully motivated by the prospects of defeat or death to achieve ends “directly opposed to one’s own.”⁹⁸ Suffice it to say that strategists must constantly keep in mind the need to design their strategies on the reality that the “enemy is a reacting, thinking being; he is not sitting still waiting for your onslaught but actively creating his own strategy both to foil yours and probably attack you.”⁹⁹

Worth adding is that the need to take into account the adversary’s active role is as true in business or chess as it is in military competitions or war. It also underscores the degree to which strategies, as heuristics or guesses, must always remain open to modifications or adjustments over time in response to the opponents’ actions. The competitor’s unpredictable responses constitute one of the most fundamental uncertainties affecting strategy.

FALSE PRESUMPTIONS ABOUT COMPETENCE OR CAUSALITY (#6). There has been no shortage of false presumptions by Americans about the competence of the US government to turn Iraq, following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, into a reasonably

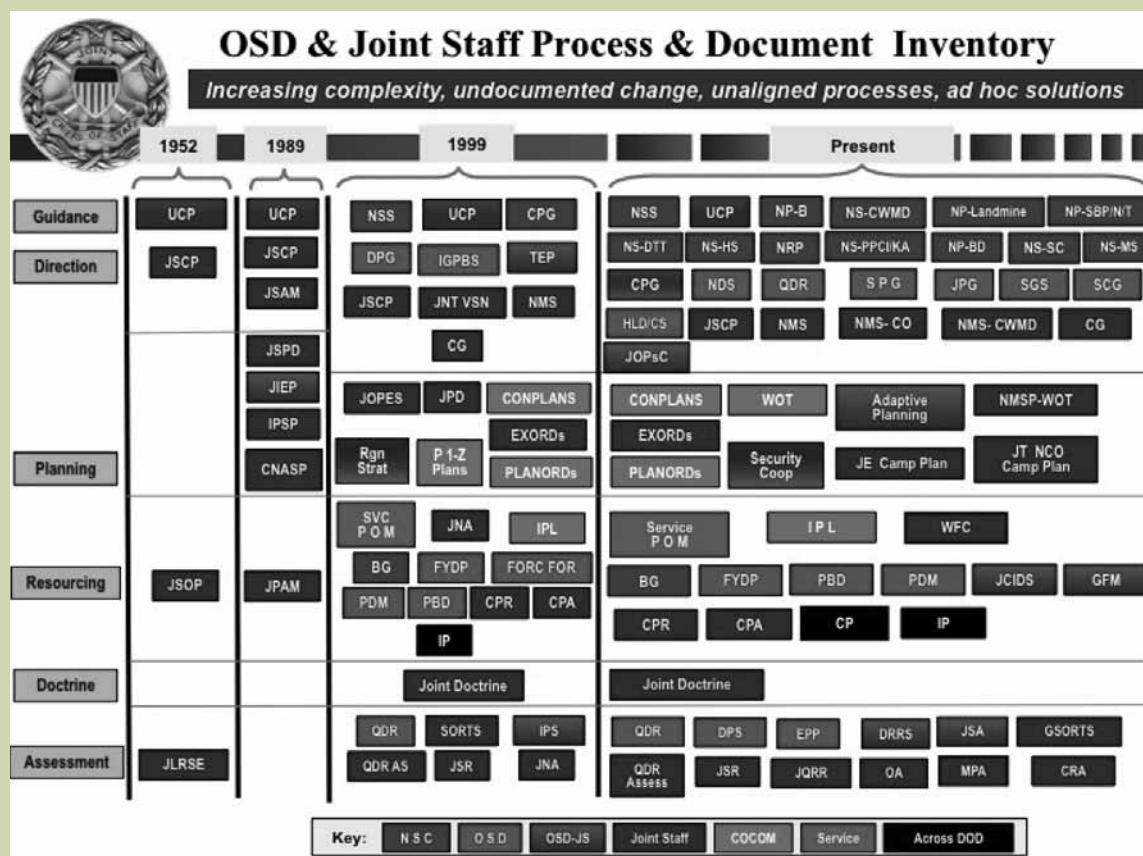
⁹⁸ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 15.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 404–405.

prosperous and democratic ally. Consider the brief and unfortunate history of the Coalition Provisional Authority under L. Paul Bremer, III, from May 2003 until June 2004. Bremer's task proved far more difficult than anyone had imagined. Early mistakes such as his orders on de-Baathification of the Iraqi government and disbanding the Iraqi military only compounded the difficulties. As the Central Intelligence Agency station chief remarked just before Bremer promulgated these two orders, de-Baathification alone would put up to fifty thousand of the most powerful, well-connected elites in the country out on the street overnight, driving them underground and leaving them angry at the Americans.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the Defense Department's planning assumption that getting to Baghdad and deposing Saddam Hussein would lead quickly and directly to a democratic Iraq with a viable economy that could largely pay for its own reconstruction reflects profoundly false assumptions about causality in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

¹⁰⁰ Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), pp. 193–194.

FIGURE 1. THE JOINT STRATEGIC PLANNING SYSTEM, 1952–2007*



* Joint Chiefs of Staff, "The Joint Strategic Planning System (JSPS)," June 2007, unclassified, Slide 4.

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INSUFFICIENT FOCUS ON STRATEGY (#7). Perhaps the most common pitfall regarding focus is having too many individuals and organizations involved in the crafting of strategy. As Feaver has noted, the US “military establishment is too large to do strategy well—way too many people are in the analysis business full-time.”¹⁰¹ The result is that the role of the “masters and commanders” who should be making strategy is blurred and undermined. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the Joint Staff’s Joint Strategic Planning System (JSPS) from 1952 through mid-2007. Again, strategic planning is not strategy, and the point of this briefing was to explain a long overdue simplification of the existing planning system that eliminated or combined twenty-three processes and documents. Nevertheless, the sheer complexity of the Joint Staff’s formal planning system from 1999 through 2007 says much about the bureaucratic difficulties of achieving the focus needed for coherent strategy.

Strategy, in the creative sense of an insight or reframing of the problem that suddenly sees a way to achieve one’s ends by discerning or creating favorable asymmetries is rarely, if ever, the product of the formal processes depicted in Figure 1, or the result of interactions among large numbers of individuals and organizations. Most often, strategic insight is the product of a few smart individuals with the necessary cognitive skills, or small, tight-knit teams of such individuals. Anglo-American strategy in World War II was largely the work of four talented leaders, each of whose occasional madcap schemes or outright strategic misjudgments were vetoed by two or three of the others. Figure 1 also provides a graphic illustration of why Mintzberg argued that the very purpose of formalized strategic planning in business has been “to reduce the power of management over strategy making.”¹⁰²

If anything, Mintzberg’s insight is even more important in the crafting of national security strategy than it is in the world of business strategy. A point often made by the vast majority of those with firsthand experience in developing national strategy concerns the importance of the president’s role. If the president is unable or disinclined to invest time and effort on national strategy, if he or she is unwilling to take a direct role in making strategic choices, then there is little likelihood that the administration will take strategy seriously or produce effective strategies. Instead of genuine strategy, the administration of a president who leaves strategic choice to others will degenerate into reacting to events and crises as they occur rather than influencing the slow-moving variables that can shape future strategic options and possibilities.

ASSESSING AREAS OF COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE (#8). If strategy is fundamentally about identifying or exploiting asymmetries in the competitive situation, then an important aspect of strategic thinking is to understand one’s areas of comparative advantage. Attrition, in which one simply grinds down the other side by pitting strength against strength, may be a strategy, but it is not a particularly good one. The

¹⁰¹ Feaver, email to Barry Watts, December 30, 2008.

¹⁰² Mintzberg, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” p. 109.

asymmetries at the core of good strategies generally have to do with focusing one's areas of strength or competence against the opponent's areas of weakness or competitive disadvantage. To recall a Cold War example, the potential NATO strategy of trying to match the Warsaw Pact tank for tank and division for division never made much sense either economically or politically. What did make sense was exploiting US advantages in technology to offset Warsaw Pact numbers. As William J. Perry recalled in 1997,

... we were faced with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, and they had about three times as many tanks, artillery [pieces], and armored personnel carriers as we had, and we thought that they had a serious intent to use them, to send a blitzkrieg down through the Fulda Gap.... We had no conceivable way of increasing the size of the US or the NATO forces to deal with that, and so the "offset strategy" [devised by Defense Department officials] was no great leap of brilliance. It was simply a necessity. The only way we had of dealing with the three-to-one quantity advantage that Soviet forces had was to try to offset that with our superior technology. That was the key to our entire defense strategy in the late '70s and on into the early '80s.¹⁰³

Of course, it may not always be obvious what one's areas of distinctive competence really are, and the US military Services have often been disinclined to identify adversary weaknesses. In addition, either side's areas of distinctive competence or weakness can change over time. Indeed, it is possible for either side to develop areas of distinctive competence or shore up areas of particular weakness. The main point, though, is that one needs to be brutally objective about where one's areas of advantage really lie.

PUTTING STRATEGY IN THE RIGHT HANDS (#9). Individuals with the cognitive skills to do strategy well—particularly the requisite insight into competitive situations—tend to be rare, even among bright people with long experience in national security affairs or the military profession. American political and military elites have tended to ignore this reality. Too often we have put strategy in the wrong hands, or left it to large staffs and bureaucracies rather than talented individuals or small teams. Given the complex security challenges the United States now faces, the US government will surely need to do better in choosing the individuals in whose hands the crafting of strategy is to be entrusted. Hoping for strategic genius may be too much. But surely a degree of strategic competence is not too much to ask.

Individuals with the cognitive skills to do strategy well tend to be rare, even among bright people with long experience in national security affairs or the military profession.

¹⁰³ "Perry on Precision Strike," *AIR FORCE Magazine*, April 1997, online at <<http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/1997/April%201997/0497perry.aspx>>. Perry was the Under Secretary of Defense for Defense Research and Engineering when he initiated the Assault Breaker program—Richard H. Van Atta, Jack Nunn and Alethia Cook, "Assault Breaker" in Richard H. Van Atta, et al., *Transformation and Transition: DARPA's Role in Fostering an Emerging Revolution in Military Affairs*, Vol. 2, *Detailed Assessments* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, November 2003), p. IV-1.

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Of course, identifying those rare individuals with the mindset and talent to develop strategy will not be easy. Educational degrees and other credentials appear to be of no more than marginal value in selecting competent strategists. Franklin Roosevelt was perhaps the one of the four Anglo-American masters and commanders “who most influenced the course of the war,” but he openly acknowledged that he knew the least about grand strategy.¹⁰⁴ The problem of selecting competent strategists is much the same as picking future air-to-air aces based on intelligence tests, educational records, personality traits, or even performance in undergraduate pilot training. We simply do not yet have very reliable predictors of performance other than waiting to see which pilots later excel in actual air-to-air combat.¹⁰⁵ George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower had similar difficulties picking capable combat commanders during World War II.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, as difficult as the problem of selecting competent strategists may be, it is one that the US national security establishment needs to face.

FAILING TO UNDERSTAND THE ADVERSARY (#10). This final strategy pitfall can be viewed as a corollary to failing to define the strategic challenge competitively (#5). The fact that the enemy’s responses over time can affect the viability of one’s own strategy points to the importance of making every effort to understand the opponent’s likely goals, calculations of costs and benefits, assessments, willingness to take risks, and strategic framework or culture. These are not easily understood, and Americans have generally not excelled at developing an informed sense for how the enemy thinks. Consider the debate that erupted in early 1950 over the drafting of NSC-68, which established containment as the national security strategy of President Harry Truman’s administration. Under Paul Nitze, who then headed the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department and was charged with drafting NSC-68, US strategy moved away from George Kennan’s view that Soviet expansionist tendencies could be contained primarily through political and economic means. Instead, NSC-68 concluded that deterring overt Soviet aggression during the next four or five years (when the danger of a surprise Soviet nuclear attack would peak) demanded “substantially increased general air, ground, and sea strength, atomic capabilities, and air and civilian defenses.”¹⁰⁷ This change generated significant dissent. Charles E. “Chip” Bohlen, who had served in the US embassy in Moscow during the 1930s and had been Roosevelt’s Russian

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 583.

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, as Malcolm Gladwell has recently observed, talent scouts for the National Football League have not even had much success predicting whether a successful college quarterback will succeed as a quarterback in the NFL (Malcolm Gladwell, “Most Likely To Succeed,” *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2008, pp. 36–37, 39).

¹⁰⁶ While Lloyd Fredendall and Mark Clark were both identified in Marshall’s black book as promising future commanders and given command positions, Fredendall failed as a corps commander in North Africa and Clark failed as the Avalanche commander at Salerno in Italy (Perry, *Partners in Command*, pp. 158–161, 217–228).

¹⁰⁷ NSC-68, “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” April 14, 1950, p. 1 of the section titled “Conclusions.”

translator during World War II, argued that the Soviet leadership's overriding priority was to preserve their regime.¹⁰⁸ During final review of the NSC-68, Bohlen convinced Nitze to change the document's prioritization of Soviet objectives:

As Soviet aims, Nitze had originally listed world domination first. Bohlen persuaded him to describe "protecting their own borders" as the Soviets' top priority. Second came controlling their satellites. Then only third came global expansion.¹⁰⁹

Debate in the West over differing views of Soviet intentions and attitudes toward risk-taking continued to the end of the Cold War. True, the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 indicated that Nikita Khrushchev at least was not willing to risk nuclear war to expand Soviet influence.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, in the late 1970s Richard Pipes, who had headed the Central Intelligence Agency's 1976 "Team B" experiment in competitive intelligence analysis, provocatively argued that Soviet leaders believed that they could fight and win a nuclear war.¹¹¹ Interviews with members of the Soviet General Staff in the early 1990s, however, sharply contradicted Pipes' assessment and supported Bohlen's. Particularly compelling was Colonel General Andrian A. Danilevich's recollection of how "visibly terrified" Leonid I. Brezhnev and Andrei A. Kosygin had been, during a 1972 exercise, at the prospect of retaliating with nuclear weapons following a US first strike that had theoretically devastated the Soviet armed forces and killed 80 million Soviet citizens.¹¹² The eventual outcome of the Cold War provides further evidence that Kennan and Bohlen were closer to the truth about Soviet priorities and risk-taking than were Nitze and Pipes.

What is striking here is how long fundamental disagreement among those involved in crafting or influencing American Cold War strategy persisted. Poor or inaccurate understanding of the opponent is generally not conducive to good strategy. Looking ahead, the United States unquestionably needs to develop a cadre of experts on militant Islamic groups, China, and other key areas of concern such as Iran, North Korea and Pakistan. Unfortunately, the record of past American performance in this area is not very encouraging.

* * *

In hindsight at least, it is fairly straightforward to use these various strategy pitfalls to assess historical cases of differential strategic performance such as

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¹⁰⁸ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ Isaacson and Thomas, *The Wise Men*, p. 498.

¹¹⁰ Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), pp. 295–296, 324.

¹¹¹ See Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, July 1977, pp. 21–34.

¹¹² John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shull, *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985*, Vol. II, *Soviet Post-Cold War Testimonial Evidence* (McLean, VA: BDM Federal, September 22, 1993), p. 27.

Anglo-American versus German grand strategy in World War II. At various times, Churchill, Roosevelt, Marshall, and Brooke were each prone to falling prey to one or more of these pitfalls. Churchill and Brooke, constantly mindful of the limits World War I had imposed on Commonwealth resources and fighting power, were inclined to pursue peripheral objectives, but no degree of success in Italy, much less in the Balkans, could have defeated Germany. Collectively, however, the four masters and commanders were able to avoid serious strategic missteps because no one of them could flatly override the others. Here it is revealing to observe that “Churchill never once used his position as prime minister and minister of defence to overrule the [British] Chiefs of Staff Committee, at least while Brooke sat on it.”¹¹³ Similarly, if Overlord had been attempted as early as 1942, or even 1943, the invasion would probably have been beyond Allied capabilities and resources. One of the major constraints on Overlord was the availability of sufficient landing ships and landing craft to enable the Americans and British to put ashore enough divisions in the first hours and days to preclude being pushed back into the English Channel. Overlord employed over 4,100 landing ships and landing craft of all types for the initial assault on June 6, 1944.¹¹⁴ More than 80 percent of these landing ships and craft were supplied by the United States. Since the United States had only produced just over 1,000 landing craft in 1941 and the Pacific theater absorbed a significant share of US production in 1942 and 1943, Overlord was not supportable until 1944 on the basis of the requirement for landing ships and landing craft alone.¹¹⁵

Hitler’s strategic decisions, once again, were not subjected to the collegial constraints that restrained Anglo-American grand strategy. He began World War II without fully mobilizing the German economy. He attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 without appreciating the resources that defeating the Russians might ultimately require. He pursued counterproductive objectives as exemplified by his racial policies in Russia and his obsession with Stalingrad as a prestige objective. Time and again, Hitler’s “no retreat” decisions wasted resources Germany could not afford to waste. His contempt for the productivity of the US economy and the fighting power the Allies would eventually bring to bear against Germany reflected little understanding of the potentialities and determination of his adversaries. Last but not least, this litany of strategic errors argues that German strategy during World War II ended up in the wrong hands. As the world war he had chosen to unleash unfolded, Adolph Hitler, despite his dazzling victories in 1939 and 1940, fell prey to most of the strategic pitfalls elaborated in this discussion.

¹¹³ Rogers, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 574.

¹¹⁴ Chandler and Collins, *The D-Day Encyclopedia*, p. 381.

¹¹⁵ For discussion of landing ship and landing craft in the Normandy invasion, see Gordon A. Harrison, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: Cross-Channel Attack* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1950), pp. 59–63, 100–105. Rogers notes that one of the mysteries of the Second World War is that “there never seemed to be enough landing craft to go around all the major theaters” (Rogers, *Masters and Commanders*, p. 437).



CONCLUSION

REGAINING US STRATEGIC COMPETENCE

War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. A sensitive and discriminating judgment is called for; a skilled intelligence to scent out the truth.

— Clausewitz, 1832¹¹⁶

Innovation has never been institutionalized. Systems have never been able to reproduce the synthesis created by the genius entrepreneur or even the ordinary competent strategist, and they likely never will.

— Henry Mintzberg, 1994¹¹⁷

The central argument of this report is that, in light of the complex and varied security challenges the United States currently faces, the nation can no longer afford poor strategic performance. What steps might the US security establishment take to begin regaining a modicum of strategic competence, especially at the national level? In November 2007, Michèle Flournoy presented a paper at a Naval War College workshop in which she argued that what the US government desperately needs in this regard is “a more integrated approach to national security that includes the following elements:

- > An NSC-led strategy and planning process for national security,
- > An NSC-Office of Management and Budget-led (OMB) process to develop an integrated, multi-year national security budget, and

¹¹⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

¹¹⁷ Mintzberg, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” p. 110. The précis of this article reads: “*Planners shouldn’t create strategies, but they can supply data, help managers think strategically, and program the vision*” (ibid., p. 107, italics in the original).

- > Congressional oversight that can consider funding proposals for specific mission areas that cut across multiple agencies.”¹¹⁸

The Eisenhower administration's approach to national strategy offers useful insights concerning how the United States might improve its strategic performance.

These are worthy goals. Nevertheless, the operative word is “process.” Regarding the creation of an NSC-led strategy and planning *process* for national security, Flournoy advocates: (1) conducting semiannual “over the horizon” reviews of potential crises and challenges for agency deputies; (2) conducting a quadrennial national security review to set priorities, develop strategy, and determine needed capabilities; (3) creating a classified national security planning guidance in the first year of a new administration, to be updated biannually; (4) starting an annual tabletop exercise program for senior national security officials to practice managing future challenges and identify capability shortfalls; and (5) instituting a scenario-based planning process to support resource planning.¹¹⁹ The emphasis of these various suggestions appears to be on precisely the sort of formal planning processes that Mintzberg, Rumelt, and others see as antithetical to genuine strategy in which the aim is to identify or create asymmetries that can be exploited to defeat the adversary. Nowhere in Flournoy’s recommendations does one see any overriding emphasis on “the creative act of synthesizing experiences into a novel strategy,” or the “informal learning that produces new perspectives and combinations.”¹²⁰ This is not to suggest that Flournoy’s process and procedural suggestions are without merit. It is simply to say that they do not fully come to grips with the deeper reasons why US strategic performance has deteriorated: namely, the growing failure of US political and military elites to understand what strategy is and the disinclination to view strategy as important.

Flournoy, however, is right that the Eisenhower administration’s approach to national strategy offers useful insights concerning how the United States might improve its strategic performance. The week before Eisenhower’s inauguration as president on January 20, 1953, he announced that Robert Cutler, a Boston lawyer who had served on George Marshall’s staff during World War II, would be appointed to the new position of special advisor for national security affairs.¹²¹ Cutler’s initial task was “to give some form, direction, and organization to the work of the National Security

¹¹⁸ Michèle A. Flournoy, “Navigating Treacherous Shoals: Establishing a Robust Interagency Process for National Security Strategy, Planning, and Budgeting” in Richmond M. Lloyd (ed.), *Defense Strategy and Forces: Setting Future Directions* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2008), p. 272.

¹¹⁹ Flournoy, “Navigating Treacherous Shoals,” pp. 273–275.

¹²⁰ Mintzberg, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” p. 109. As an example of strategic insight, Mintzberg cites the creation of the Polaroid camera. “One day in 1943, Edwin Land’s three-year-old daughter asked why she could not immediately see the picture he had just taken of her. Within an hour, this scientist conceived the camera that would transform his company. In other words, Land’s vision was the synthesis of the insight evoked by his daughter’s question and his vast technical knowledge.” (ibid.).

¹²¹ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 86. Bowie served on the Eisenhower Planning Board as head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff under John Foster Dulles (Andrew McFadzean, “The Bigger Picture: Biography and/or History? Robert Bowie,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, December 2003, pp. 44–45).

Council.”¹²² While some of the structural mechanisms Cutler established—notably the NSC Planning and Operations Coordinating Boards—may well be worthy of emulation today, the most important lessons lie in how the reorganized NSC functioned to help Eisenhower and his cabinet craft national strategies that integrated “ends, means, and financial resources.”¹²³

To assist him in determining how best to reorganize the NSC, Cutler set up study groups of experienced national security hands, which included Paul Nitze, Allan Dulles, George Marshall, Robert Lovett, and Charles Bohlen. On March 16, 1953, Cutler submitted, and the president approved, a reorganization plan based on the advice of the study groups, Cutler’s own experience, and his consultations with Eisenhower. The thrust of Cutler’s plan, which reflected Eisenhower’s intent, was to make the NSC “the most important policy-making body in the government” by generating vigorous and informed debate among the president and key government officials at the cabinet level and below.¹²⁴

The NSC system that emerged exhibited a number of features that appear worthy of emulation today. The two most important were the president’s direct involvement in developing national strategy and the substantive role played by the Planning Board in articulating strategic options. Eisenhower saw NSC meetings as the most effective means of reaching informed decisions on strategic choices. He led the NSC meetings himself, missing only six of the 179 that took place during Cutler’s nearly four-year tenure as national security advisor.¹²⁵ The president expected the NSC principals to come to NSC meetings prepared to discuss the problems at issue, which included having actually read the papers prepared by the Planning Board. Eisenhower “took an active part in the debates, injecting comments, questions, and sometimes playing ‘devil’s advocate,’ in order to probe the alternatives or implications of a preferred course.”¹²⁶ He was also willing to make strategic choices himself, as he did during the Solarium exercise in rejecting a preventative war strategy against the Soviet Union at the outset and, later, Task Force C’s rollback strategy because it involved “a substantial risk of general war” with the Russians.¹²⁷ In fact, at the Solarium out-brief on July 16, 1953, Eisenhower ruled out any strategy that could not win the support of America’s

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¹²² Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, p. 311.

¹²³ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 87. The predominant model of strategy in the US military today, especially in the US Army, is notion of strategy as of balancing ends (or objectives), ways (or courses of action), and means (or instruments by which some end can be achieved). See Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., “Toward Understanding Military Strategy” in Joseph R. Cerami and James F. Holcomb, Jr., (eds.), *U.S. Army War College Guide to Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, February 2001), pp. 179–180. Again, though, this model provides little hint as to how to go about doing strategy.

¹²⁴ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 88.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–127.

There can be little doubt that the president himself played an active, direct and *persistent* role in developing the administration's "New Look" strategy.

allies, cost too much, or accepted a greater risk of general war.¹²⁸ Thus there can be little doubt that the president himself played an active, direct and *persistent* role in developing the administration's "New Look" strategy—a strategy that emphasized the Air Force's "massive atomic capability" to deter Soviet aggression while maintaining a sound US economy based on free private enterprise "both for high defense productivity and for the maintenance of... living standards and free institutions" in the United States.¹²⁹

The role played by the Planning Board was especially important. As Eisenhower explained at an NSC meeting early in his first administration, principals such as the Secretaries of Defense, State, and Treasury, the Director of Central Intelligence, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would generally be too busy running their departments and agencies to do the sort of long-term strategic thinking Eisenhower desired. The task of the Planning Board was to supply this thinking. Chaired by Cutler, the Planning Board's members were the principal planning officials for their departments or agencies, and their job was to develop "statesman-like solutions to the problems of national security."¹³⁰ In perhaps the best account of the Planning Board, Robert Bowie (who was a member) and the historian Richard Immerman argue that its importance in developing strategy cannot be overstated.

It was the forum in which twice or more often a week officials of great "stature and caliber" interacted and collaborated with one another in an effort to analyze trends, anticipated as well as identify problems, consider proposed solutions' advantages and disadvantage, and confront—explicitly—questions of means and ends.... The members not only had full access to their own departments and agencies, but they could request memoranda, staff studies, and other pertinent data from others when appropriate.¹³¹

The Planning Board's members briefed their principals before every NSC meeting, their papers provided the basis for NSC meetings on security strategy, and they sought to deal with disputes among their principals by emphasizing differences and conflicts rather than by sweeping them under the rug. In addition, Eisenhower prohibited Planning Board members from accompanying their principals on trips out of the country, except when absolutely necessary, so that they could "stay on the job and supply a continuity of planning and thought."¹³²

One can, of course, question how effective these arrangements were in formulating effective national security strategy. While NSC-162/2 enabled Eisenhower to restrain

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

¹²⁹ NSC 162/2, "Basic National Security Policy," October 30, 1953, pp. 14, 18, 19. See also, Herman S. Wolk, "The 'New Look,'" *AIR FORCE Magazine*, August 2003, pp. 80–83. According to Ambrose the term "New Look" was the creation of public-relation people at the Pentagon (Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, p. 356).

¹³⁰ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 91.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

defense spending while containing Soviet power without accepting increased risk of all-out nuclear war, which Eisenhower judged suicidal for both the United States and the Soviet Union, later administrations looked long and hard for alternatives to massive atomic retaliation. There was also the practical matter of ensuring that the government carried out the administration's national security strategy, once it had been debated, decided upon, and approved by the president. This was the purpose of periodic progress reports from the NSC's Operations Coordinating Board.¹³³ Nonetheless, the Solarium exercise, which led eventually to NSC 162-2, stands out as an impressive example of Eisenhower's and Cutler's efforts to take strategy seriously and do it well. Of Solarium, Bowie and Immerman later wrote:

No president before or after Eisenhower... ever received such a systematic and focused briefing on the threats facing the nation's security and the possible strategies for coping with them.¹³⁴

Bowie and Immerman also judged the decision of John F. Kennedy's administration to dismantle the NSC structure Eisenhower had set up as "a grave mistake."¹³⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, eventually came to the same conclusion based on his own experience. Brzezinski especially lamented the elimination of the Eisenhower administration's Planning Board.¹³⁶ There is every reason, then, to think recreating something akin to the Planning Board might be a useful organizational step toward regaining US strategic competence.

More broadly, re-creating or otherwise emulating the substantive features of the Eisenhower administration's NSC appears to be long overdue. Regaining strategic competence should be an overriding imperative for Barack Obama's administration. The United States government has avoided taking strategy seriously far too long. Some degree of strategic competence desperately needs to be regained if the United States is to meet the security challenges of the twenty-first century without suffering imperial overreach, bankruptcy, or defeats far worse than Vietnam. It is also past time to recognize that not everyone has the cognitive abilities and insight to be a competent strategist. We need to find ways to identify and appropriately utilize those who do.

Regaining strategic competence should be an overriding imperative for Barack Obama's administration. The United States government has avoided taking strategy seriously far too long.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 93.

¹³⁴ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 127.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

¹³⁶ "The NSC at 50: Past, Present, and Future," Council on Foreign Relations, transcript of discussion moderated by Ted Koppel, October 31, 1997, p. 7, online at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/64/nsc_at_50.html>.

About the Author

Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., President, is an expert on US military strategy, policy and operations, military revolutions, and counterinsurgency. He gained extensive strategic planning experience on the personal staff of three secretaries of defense, in the Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment, and as a member of the National Defense Panel, the Defense Science Board Task Force on Joint Experimentation, and the Joint Forces Command's Transformation Advisory Board. He is the author of numerous CSBA reports on such topics as the Quadrennial Defense Review, alliances, the war in Iraq, and transformation of the US military. He has provided expert testimony before congressional committees, as well as academic and other professional groups. His work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*, and professional and public policy journals, including *Foreign Affairs* and *Issues in Science and Technology*. He received the 1987 Furniss Award for his book, *The Army and Vietnam*. He is the author of the recent book, *7 Deadly Scenarios*. A graduate of West Point, he retired from the US Army in 1993. Dr. Krepinevich holds a Master of Public Affairs and Ph.D. from Harvard University.

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